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by Jack Sharkey



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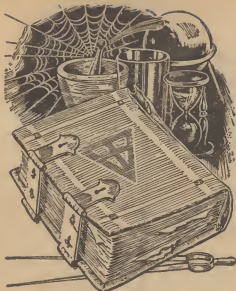
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NOVEMBER 1963

Volume 12 Number 11

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IF you are beginning to think about mailing Christmas packages to the folks back home, and silently cursing the U.S. Post Office for the snail-like delivery speed of its parcel post service, we have for you this month just the thing: a gravity machine that will get all the goodies under the tree in good time. And, as a matter of fact, even if that tree is in another star system.

What all this comes down to is that British physicist Freeman Dyson—he who sometime ago put forth the theory that an advanced culture in another solar system must have redistributed its planetary material to form a shell around its sun—has made another fantastic but provocative suggestion. To wit: that some civilizations may use gravity rather than sunlight as a power source.

Dyson postulates a people who live on a planet that circles twin white dwarf stars. White dwarfs are small, radiate comparatively little light, but are enormously dense. The star's density gives it immense gravitational energy. If one fired a rocket so that it passed one of these twin stars as it was approaching, the rocket would be gripped by the star's gravity and slung back into space with much more energy than it had in the first place. In other words, it would acquire some of the star's own gravitational energy.

According to Dyson, the added energy could be exploited to make possible, for example, accelerations of up to 10,000 G's. This would, he says, make it feasible to use "white-dwarf binaries scattered around the galaxy as relay stations for heavy long-distance freight transportation." Of course with the proper planning of orbital approaches, any large star could be used as a "gravity machine," although it would be incomparably less efficient than a dwarf in terms of its output of gravitational energy.

* * *

If you have been reading Sam Moskowitz's profiles of sf writers in *FANTASTIC* (and in our sister magazine, *AMAZING*), you may be interested to know that Sam's book, based in large part on this material, is now selling well in the bookstores. Title: *Explorers of the Infinite* (World Publishing Co., \$6.00, free plug).





The tiny group of survivors quickly learned the perils of the blue pool. It took longer to learn the real lesson of . . .

THE AFTER TIME

By
JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator **COYE**



RORY'S eyelids fluttered, then remained open. He stared for a long time at the ragged crack across the plaster ceiling of his room without recognition or awareness. It took him nearly a full minute before the significance of what he was seeing registered on his brain. Then he sat up swiftly, with a frantic thudding beginning in his chest as realization came.

"No!" he shuddered, fighting the truths told him by his eyes. "No, it didn't happen. It can't have!"

Memory returned slowly, belying his frightened denial.

His whirling thoughts began to conjure up a series of images, ghastly images. He'd been in bed, reading . . . there was light, terrible silent searing light flaring through his window, etching the silhouette of the window on the wall facing the foot of his bed . . . and then noise, loud and steadily louder noise that had struck him like a physical blow, stunned him into merciful unconsciousness.

Rory threw back the blankets, barely noticing their white-powdered surface where sundered plaster had fallen in thick white clouds. He saw the glinting spicules and shards of the shattered window just in time, and held his bare feet clear of the floor. With shaking fingers he reached into the relatively clear area beneath

the bed and found his shoes, slipped them onto his bare feet and laced them. Then he got up, his foot kicking aside the book that had fallen to the floor, and went to the window.

There was no glass left in it, not even around the rim. The sash was splintered as though struck by a piledriver. On the wall where he had first seen its silhouette, its shape remained, burnt brown and black into the blistered paint. And still he couldn't believe it had really happened. Not until he looked out the window.

Yellow sunlight spilled warmly over the crumbling bricks on the rubble-heap that had been a city. Only the buildings that—like his own—had stood in shielded sites, with other buildings fortunately arrayed between them and the blast area, other buildings that now lay in smoldering ruin, still stood. Nowhere could he see an unbroken window. His mind began to imagine the scene that no man could have actually witnessed and lived.

The wind ramming outward from the blast. Wind that had compressed the air into a dilating ring of concrete-hardness, snapping bridge-cables like scorched thread, lifting heavy trucks like a swirl of dead leaves, meeting steel-and-cement obstacles as a tidal wave meets a sand-castle.

Rory shivered and turned

away from the horrifying sight.

He belatedly began flexing fingers and toes, checking out his body for damage, seeing if he could breathe without pain. So far as he could determine, he was untouched by the catastrophe. That was something. Suddenly remembering, he crunched over the littered floor to his closet and found the radio on the shelf, the precious battery-powered radio that had somehow been spared, the radio that would let him know what had happened to the city. He clicked it on and waited.

AFTER a moment, it began to hum and crackle. Rory twirled the selector-knob, trying first the Conelrad bands. Hum and static. He turned the selector more slowly, then, trying every band on the dial. Hum and static. "It's broken," he lied to himself. "Someone must be left, somewhere."

Mumbling other hollow encouragements to himself, he began to dress. It was late spring, but he carried a pile-lined jacket with him, just in case. As an afterthought, before he left the room, he rummaged in the splintered wreckage that had been his dresser and found his jackknife, the knife he hadn't carried with him since he'd been a young boy. It had, besides the blades, a can-opener, corkscrew, and screwdriver. It might, he realized num-

bly, be the last of its kind on Earth. He pocketed it very carefully.

Outside his room, he found stark sunlight illuminating only half a hallway. The angular brunt of the blast against his apartment house had blown away the rear corner of the building like an axe removing a wedge from a square cheese. If his bed had been just one room further toward the back—Rory didn't let himself complete the thought.

There was, luckily, enough of the staircase left to descend. Five floors down, on ground level, the entrance was deep in rubble. Rory had to scrunch across broken masonry and wood on his hands and knees to reach the street. The door had been mostly glass, so getting through it was no problem. On the street, the extent of the chaos was more sickeningly apparent. Off in a pile of bricks, a small grey body was hunched, its ugly matted fur glittering dully in the sunlight. He stooped by pure reflex and hurled a rock at it. The creature chattered angrily at him, but fled, its hairless tail vanishing after it through a hole in a building wall. Rory started to investigate, to see what it had been nibbling upon, then decided not to. In their own way, he realized sickly, the rats would be quite beneficial; enough of them could spare the city the final indignity of rot-

ting carrion, and its accompanying stench.

He started carefully up the street, his fingers—on the unopened knife in his pocket—perspiring stickily. The thing to do, he knew was find food, food untainted—if such a hope were possible—by radiation. Then a place to stay. His room, while he might return there for extra clothing and blankets, was in too perilous a locale to be very safe. His apartment building might, at any time, sigh dustily and topple over onto its already fallen section. Then, with a source of food, and a rat-proofed shelter, he could start to hunt for other survivors. He made himself believe he'd find them; he had to believe he wasn't alone or go crazy.

And even as he thought this, he heard the skittering of gravel down a brickpile, and looked up to see Anna. She stood nervously on a rise of buckled pavement, watching him as he advanced toward her, slowly, over the crushed facade of a grocery store. Her pose—hands open wide, not quite touching her thighs, and flexed knees rounding out the crease in her dark slacks—told him she was poised for instant flight if he showed any signs of menace.

"Don't run," he said simply, halting his advance and extending his hands toward her.

She looked at him, carefully, without moving, her eyes taking in his neat clothing, bluing jawline, and tangled mat of light brown hair. Catching her focal point, he grinned, suddenly, and ran a hand through his hair. "It won't stay down without water," he said. "I gave up trying to comb it dry. And," he added, rubbing the back of his hand against his bristling chin, "my electric razor didn't want to perform."

She laughed, abruptly, then halted, as if suddenly reminded that the two of them were at a wake. "My name's Anna," she said.

"Rory," he answered politely. Neither of them used surnames, without realizing this omission. Some unconscious instinct told them that this particular distinction of persons was no longer necessary; there was, so far as they knew, only the one Rory, the one Anna, on the planet.

SHE came down to him, then, smiling shyly. "I'm glad I'm not the only one," she said, "left alive in the city."

"Me, too," he answered. He stared at her, at her longish hair, the color of mink fur, at her slightly too-close-set grey eyes, and pale skin. She wasn't a heart-stopping beauty, but she wasn't the worst he'd ever seen, either. She blushed, all at once, and he realized he'd been looking long

enough to have taken written inventory. "Sorry," he said.

She shrugged briefly, but said nothing.

"I was just starting to hunt for food," he told her. "There's no way of telling what the radiation-count might be, but I figure if we stick to canned goods and unbroken bottles, we have a fighting chance of avoiding contamination."

"And then?" she said, after absorbing this.

"Shelter. A place to sleep. Preferably ringed with rat traps, if we can find a hardware store someplace."

Anna made a face and shuddered convulsively. "They're everywhere," she said tautly, her eyes flicking from building to building. "They must have been down in the sewers when—" As though it were taboo to mention the death of the city, she stopped short.

"The best place they could've been," Rory agreed. "We may yet find some people who were smart enough to join them."

"Let's look," she said suddenly, clutching his arm. "I think it'll help if there are more people. If we can find a radio, learn what's happened—" She saw something in his face. "You've tried?"

"Nothing but noise," he said. "If there are any stations still standing, no one's using them.

Unless FM. My radio doesn't play FM."

"It'd be nice," she said, in what sounded like a non sequitur until Rory recalled the mainstay of FM broadcasts, "to hear music again. I hope we can."

"There's a set of bongos on my closet shelf," he said. Anna laughed, then began to cry, and Rory held her in his arms till her spate of hysterical outletting passed.

"Feel better?"

"Much."

"Maybe if we build a fire, someone'll see the smoke—" he began, then looked around them and gave it up. The great re-entry of wind after the initial blast, rushing back to fill the void left after that massive flare of heat, seemed to have drawn the strength from whatever fires had started, but there were still black plumes and grey threads and blue clouds rising from scattered spots in the ruined city. One small fire's smoking would go quite unnoted by other survivors. "Maybe we could start walking," he counter-suggested, "and give a shout every block or so."

"No," Anna said sharply. "I don't want just *any* people. There may be dangerous people about, too. I want to *see* who I'm joining with before I decide to join."

"Well, we can't just stand here in the street," said Rory, starting toward the open-faced grocery

store, or what was left of it. "Let's see what we can salvage."

AN hour later, they had found just seventeen safe-appearing cans. There had been no unbroken bottles in the store, and most of the cans had been burst—or cracked too deeply to be risked—by falling walls. There was one can of evaporated milk, a tiny can of Vienna sausages, one large can of apricot nectar, and fourteen others whose labels had been burned or ripped away. The first three Rory kept aside, since they knew the contents, and could save them for some future meal. They took potluck on three of the others, and found themselves with a strange repast of artichoke hearts, peach halves, and pink salmon before them. Then they realized that they had no utensils save Rory's knife-blades.

"There's a hardware store on the next block, I remember," said Rory. "There should be spoons, or something . . ."

"Let's use our fingers," said Anna. "I'm too hungry to search." They did so, and even when the meal was done, they made no further move to hunt out spoons or forks. By tacit agreement, they didn't bother wasting the energy to seek out the habitual, but not really necessary, trimmings of a social civilization that didn't exist anymore.

Rory had just hurled one of the empty cans at a creeping grey form, and the empty container was clattering along the street, inches short of the unflinching whiskered nose of the rat, when they spotted the next survivor.

He'd come around the corner so silently that both Rory and Anna could have been attacked unawares if he presented a genuine menace. But the man was small, and old, and looked terribly hungry. Even as they scrambled to their feet at the shock of his sudden appearance so nearby, they lost the spark of fear that had sent nervous lightning through their muscles. The newcomer hesitated, watching them warily, but his eyes kept straying to the pile of yet-unopened tins at their feet. Seeing his thoughts on his face, Rory stooped, lifted the nearest can, and held it out in an unmistakable gesture of friendship.

The other rushed forward and grabbed it from him, then looked helplessly at the smooth metal surface.

"Here," said Rory, taking it from him and plying the can-opener attachment of his knife against the round top. It proved to be corn beef hash, a much more substantial foodstuff than either of them had had, but they stood by stolidly while the old man crammed his mouth full with handfuls of the stuff and

swallowed mostly without even chewing. "You'll be thirsty, after that," said Anna, picking up the apricot nectar can and handing it to Rory.

"Thanks," said the old man, as Rory punctured the top and handed it over. He drank nearly half the contents before wiping the back of his blue-veined hand across his lips and handing it back. "I've never been so hungry in my life." He smiled, then, and Anna felt a twinge of revulsion in her stomach when she saw he was quite toothless; the sight of the grinning pink gums and wet red tongue made her ill.

"I *beg* your pardon," he said sincerely, his smile vanishing at once. While his tongue probed swiftly between gums and cheeks to remove any unswallowed particles, he got a hand into the inside pocket of his shiny blue serge jacket and it came out clutching a small plastic jar in which they could see pink-and-white dentures. "Afraid to carry 'em in my mouth, in case I tripped or something," he apologized, carefully unscrewing the lid of the jar, removing the dentures, shaking excessive liquid off them, and wedging them in place.

ABRUPTLY, he looked a lot younger, and much less frail, as the concavities of his withered cheeks stretched firmly

over the porcelain surfaces in his mouth. "Are there any others in your group?" he asked.

His stress, Rory noted with relief, was on the penultimate word. "How many in *yours*?" he demanded of the man.

"Two besides myself," the man replied. "There's Mason, and Brita, and me." He remembered his manners, then. "I'm Newsome," he said.

Rory and Anna introduced themselves, and informed him regretfully that they were the sole members of their group.

"No matter," said Newsome. "It's a start, anyways. We may find more, yet."

The three of them divided the remaining thirteen cans equitably among themselves, six apiece for Rory and Newsome, and the opened apricot nectar can borne carefully by Anna, then set off to find Mason and Brita. Two days later, they found two more people, wandering alone through the shattered streets; a plump blonde woman named Sal, whose hair-roots were coming in dark grey, and a pimply-faced crewcut youth named Charlie. They found no others.

Charlie had a dog, named Scraps; part boxer, part indeterminate. Newsome's first comment when they'd found Charlie and his furry companion ("Looks too scrawny to make more'n one good meal.") had nearly alienat-

ed Charlie from the group, until Anna assured him that the dog was worth its weight in dubious nutrition as a rat-catcher and—alarm.

They made a camp partially out-of-doors, in a three-sided areaway between still-extant building walls. At the mouth of the niche, they kept a watchfire burning all night (wood pieces to feed it were sadly easy to come by), and Scraps sleeping just beyond that, inside the niche, in case some of the more fearless rats tried attacking from the upper edges of the walls. Food was still fairly plentiful, Mason having found a crumbling supermart where nearly fifty percent of the canned goods were still intact.

But after a week of sheer existing—scavenging, and eating, and sleeping, then scavenging some more—Rory decided they had better think further ahead than simply searching for another supermart when this one was depleted. He'd gone back to his room for the radio, and they turned it on every evening for fifteen minutes (conserving the irreplaceable batteries), hoping for some sign that the country was getting back on its feet. But there was never anything but humming and bursts of static.

"We've got to rebuild," he told the group, on their seventh night

in the dead city. "I can't see us going on as we've been for much longer. Maybe we could survive a year, or even two, on what we can dig from the rubble, but how are we going to get through a winter? We need a better shelter. We should build a sending-set, in case there are other survivors with working radios, in other cities. We need a source of fresh water; it's possible that the river, upstream of the city, at least, is unpolluted. There are a million-and-one things we'll have to do if we're to last beyond the supplies we manage to dig out."

"Why?" said Newsome, his wrinkled features lit by the orange firelight. "What's the good? Civilization is dead. Let it lie. The world will be a better place when we're all of us dead with our civilization."

THERE was an uncomfortable silence, then Rory turned his head toward Charlie, whose pimples were greatly diminished on their commonly astringent diet. "Suppose we hear from someone whose life isn't mostly *behind* him," Rory said.

"What about sex?" said Charlie, so softly that Mason rolled onto his back and guffawed. "Well, what *about* it?!" Charlie demanded angrily. "We have only three women, and four men. Who's going to *live* in our rebuilt world?"

"I think," said Mason, recovering himself enough to force a solemn mien on his flattish, thick features, "the boy has a point. For myself, I've taken a liking to Sal, here—" (The greying blond woman giggled unprettily) "—and Rory and Anna seem content with each other. Why don't you stake a claim on Brita, son?"

Brita, who was at least three years Charlie's senior, said, sardonically, "How do you know I don't intend to start a convent?"

"You didn't," blurted a red-faced Newsome, "include *me* in your pairing-off, Mason."

"Why?" mocked the heavy-armed, stocky man beside Sal. "What's the good? You're nearly as dead as civilization, buddy-boy. I thought we might just let *you* lie."

"Listen—!" snarled Newsome, getting to his feet with angry effort, and grabbing up a flaming fragment of wainscot from the fire. He raised this sharp-tipped firebrand like a spear, glaring across the campfire at Mason, who hadn't moved a muscle.

"Don't try it," he said flatly. "You're not too scrawny to make a meal of." Mason's eyes slid down Newsome's body and paused when they were staring into the crackling flames of the campfire. He sat there, waiting. No one spoke. Then Newsome thrust the burning splint back

into the flames and sat down, avoiding everyone's eyes.

"I think," said Rory, in the silence that followed, "we ought to have a leader. This squabbling, I'm afraid, is going to be unavoidable. There'll have to be some kind of authority in the group; some kind of judge, or policy-maker."

"Then I nominate you," said Anna.

Rory looked around the circle of firelit faces. "I can't second my own nomination," he said shortly.

"I second it," said Charlie.

"Okay by me," shrugged Mason. "I'd just as soon not have the responsibility."

"My vote's with Mason's," said Sal, leaning back until the nape of her neck rested snugly against the big man's shoulder. His arm slid affectionately around her plump waist.

"Five to two, already, doesn't leave me much choice," said Brita, yawning. "Looks like you're it, Rory."

The six voters turned simultaneously to see what Newsome would say, but the old man simply spat into the fire and got up from his place, all in cold silence. He glowered at them a moment, then shuffled back toward his blanket, against the rear wall of the niche. Then Mason smiled just a bit cruelly, and turned his face toward the darkness there.

"I take it this means you intend to find your own shelter?" he said softly. "Dig for your own food? Fight off your own rats?"

There came a rustle of blanket, then a harsh, bitter voice, close to tears. "*Damn* you, Mason!" it said helplessly.

Mason turned back to the group. "I think that makes the vote unanimous." He leaned a hand back toward his blanket and withdrew a tall amber-colored can from under it, then solemnly borrowed Rory's knife and used it to puncture the lid. A jet of spume sizzled as it hit the campfire. "A toast to our new leader," said Mason. Then added, ruefully, "In warm beer." The can circulated around the group like a sloshing peacepipe, and was then handed back through the darkness to Newsome, who finished it gratefully.

"So," said Rory, "now we make some plans."

THE next day, in the ruins of a stationery store, they got an unscorched block of paper, some new ballpoint pens, and a sturdy clipboard for their leader. Rory duly set down in firm block letters what they had discovered and discussed the night before:

Mason: Little education. Strong body and willingness to use it. Hauling and construction.

Brita: A former practical nurse. Group physician.

Sal: Widow and gourmand. Cook.

Anna: Psychology major, studying for her doctorate. Morale officer. (Teacher, when the children came?)

Charlie: High school graduate, no specialties, good with a rifle. Sentry and rat-killer, if a rifle could be found.

Newsome: A surprisingly good whittler and sketcher. Group artist, designer. (And *buffer*, Rory added mentally; the group could use a common focal point of dislike, to better unite them with each other.)

Rory: Group coordinator.

It wasn't too impressive, but it was all they had to work with. Naturally, there would be considerable overlapping. While each was a specialist of sorts, there would be no reason why Anna and Brita, for instance, could not assist Sal with preparing meals, or the men could not help Mason in his building and transporting goods, or any of them take turns doing sentry duty, although Scraps seemed to be a one-man dog, and would not patrol with anyone except Charlie.

"It's a start," Rory told the group. "For a start, I think we should find a clear place, one not in danger of eventually toppling buildings, and build a dwelling of some kind. There are plenty of bricks and wood and nails. I

think the first room constructed should be the kitchen. Until that's done, we can all sleep as we have been. But the bedrooms ought to be completed before the end of summer."

Newsome cheerfully offered to draw a set of plans, and he and Mason went into conference immediately. Charlie and Scraps went off to see if a rifle couldn't be found someplace in the city, Brita and Sal started planning a noon meal, and Rory and Anna set off with a sort of rudimentary sled (made from some carefully bent iron curtain-rods and an inverted tabletop which gave the carrying surface a handy restraining lip) to bring back as much food as they could drag behind them.

Everyone, no matter where they were going or where they remained, kept at hand or carried a heavy club to ward off rat-attacks. The creatures were growing bolder, day by day. Scraps had a raw spot on one foreleg where the teeth of a rodent had met under the fur before the dog was able to break its back with his jaws and shake the remaining life out of it. He licked and bit at the raw spot at irregular intervals, and tended to favor that foreleg when he walked. Everyone else was doubly on guard after his injury. They were determined to protect themselves.

SO it was with a mingled emotion of relief and uneasiness that Charlie remarked, on the day the kitchen was completed, "How long since anyone saw a rat?"

Brita looked up from the table, where she was slicing a loaf of date-nut bread, the only kind they could find in cans. "It can't be too long for me!" she said, shuddering.

"Hell," muttered Charlie, "I know that! I mean—I haven't seen one in a week, now. I was just looking to see how Scraps' leg was doing, and I remembered about the rats."

Mason, who had just finished hammering the last shingle onto the roof, entered the single room as Charlie spoke, and paused just inside the doorway with a scowl. "Damned if you're not right!" he said. "You don't think we scared them off?"

"Hungry rats don't scare easily," Charlie retorted.

"What's all this?" asked Rory, coming inside behind Mason. They told him. Rory scowled as Mason had. "Maybe the pool of radiation—" he said, looking around the group for some corroboration. The very center of the city, where the blast had originated, had been off-limits from the outset. There, where the heat had been greatest, a vast concavity lay, its sides steep and glassy, formed of new-cooled riv-

ers of molten brick, mortar and steel. In this mile-wide pit, a blue glow could be seen at night, filling the hollow from rim to rim like faintly seen underlit waters. It was an evil-looking spot, even from three city blocks away, the nearest any of the group dared approach. On a really dark night, the blue pool of witch-fires heaved and pulsed like a sluggish tidal basin, and its surface was alive with twinkling white sparks. Rory knew, even as he advanced his theory, that it was a futile one. The rats were never seen to go anywhere near the pit, as though instinctively equating those unnatural lights with death.

"Yeah," said Charlie, more from compassion than conviction. "Yeah, Rory, that must be it."

The subject was dropped, then, and no one brought it up again until supper that night, when a still-uneasy Charlie put his query to Anna. Newsome and Sal, who had also been away in the afternoon, looked up in interest to hear what she'd answer. But Anna, without getting the least excited, dismissed Charlie's worries with a shrug.

"Poisoned, probably," she said. "Even if their teeth *can* bite through unspoiled tins of food, I've noticed that they don't bother when there are already-sundered tins around. They're prob-

ably dying off of contamination, is all."

"Why didn't *I* think of that!" Rory mumbled. "My imagination must be going to my head!"

"Where did you *used* to keep it?" asked Brita, and the topic was dropped amid the general laughter at Rory's expense.

The next morning, Sal announced that if nobody was planning to go on an inadvertent diet, some more food must be brought back to the kitchen. Rory and Anna, needed to assist with the raising of the heavy timbers that would support the ceiling of the first bedroom, stayed with the group and sent Newsome and Charlie—the two puniest members of the group—with the sled to scavenge the supermarket ruins. By noon, six of the timbers had been raised, and a skeleton roof hammered into place, and the two of them had not returned. An hour before nightfall, Rory was becoming afraid, and could see that the others felt the same. No one had mentioned their fears aloud, as yet, but when Rory suggested they all go look, everyone agreed with alacrity.

Scraps, luckily, had been left behind, tethered whining to a post as his master and Newsome had gone off. Rory took a few turns of the rope-leash around his wrist, and let the big dog lead them away from the construction site toward the heart of the

city. When they reached the rubble that had been a supermarket, no sign of the two was found. But there was something else missing, too.

"Look!" shouted Mason, pointing into the wreckage. "Not a can, anyplace!"

THE others drew together behind him and looked, then spread out, needing no command from Rory, to investigate. After ten minutes, it was a certainty. Except for those cans already burst apart, their contents spoiled and dessicated upon the bricks, no foodstuffs were to be found.

"They can't have loaded *everything* on the sled!?" said Brita, almost babbling.

"Let's find them, now!" said Rory. "We can figure this out later." He gave Scraps his head, then, and the dog, beginning to whimper piteously, started forward again into the city, the group clambering after him over the gritty mounded rubble in the streets. Half a mile from the edge of the center of the blast area, they found the sled, empty, the towline lying limp on the street.

"Careful," said Rory, taking a firmer grip on Scraps' leash. "We're getting near the three-block limit."

"But what if they're beyond it?" said Sal, frightened.

"If—" Anna said slowly, "If

we don't remain more than ten minutes, I don't think it will do us much harm to go a little farther inward . . ." She looked at Rory, waiting.

"Okay," he said, letting Scraps pull him forward again.

One block from the lip of the pit, they found one of Charlie's shoes. Scraps lay down with his nose against it, and began to whine and moan, remaining where he was, though Rory tugged hard on the leash. A few yards beyond the shoe, Brita found the sleeve of Newsome's shirt. It was burnt off at the shoulder, and speckled with circles of scorched brown. Sal's gasp of alarm drew their attention with a jerk from a perusal of these terrifying objects.

Down at the end of the street, where the pit began, something was moving, something that twinkled like a cloud of stardust, something that floated between the leveled buildings toward where the group stood. Without knowing why, Rory shouted, "*Run!*", and the group turned about and fled up the streets, no one stopping until they reached their camp-site again. The sun was just setting, but the blue brightness in the center of the city did not die.

"Where's Scraps?" said Anna, suddenly.

Rory stared stupidly at his empty right palm. "I must've

dropped the leash, when—" he said, shaken.

They never saw the dog again.

AND the glow in the center of the city grew, day by day, in intensity. The same almost-perfect circle of desolation would, as the sun set, become a luminous field of light, pulsating beneath starlit black skies. "It's burning itself out," Mason theorized. "This is like a sort of last-ditch stand for the radiation, just like a lightbulb flares brighter than ever before the filament melts." No one disputed him. Everyone hoped he was correct.

Then, after they'd watched and hoped for three nearly foodless days, they knew the theory was fruitless. Even in daylight, the glow could be seen; a definite circular surface, flowing in slow eddies, heaving like a miniature ocean of pure energy, bluish and deadly.

The white sparks were clearer, now. The very sight of them dazzled the eye, even at midday. Yet, although the group shared a fear of unknown things, they did not think of the sparks as a menace until the day Sal went too near the area of the glowing blue pool.

She'd been out with Mason, Anna and Rory, foraging for the length of a hungry morning, and having no luck. Later, no one blamed her, her insides torn with empty churnings, for edging away

from them, starting to search the forbidden area. Even Rory, the group leader, admitted he'd been more and more tempted to lift his ban, as food grew more and more undetectable. So they were not really surprised when Anna's shout called their attention to the plump, grey-blond woman a few hundred yards off, risking the invisible poisons of that seething pool in the center of the dead city.

They started after her, though, lest her dread of starvation lead her to a worse fate; Rory had decreed that anyone who lingered in the radiation zone must be cast out from the group, lest their own contamination poison the rest. Sal was two blocks from center, and then one block, where her soft pink flesh must have been feeling the physical heat of the pool, when the horror had happened.

Tiny white-hot sparks, ceasing their random flicker over the surface of the pool, suddenly coalesced into a swarm. The sparks began to float, like some weird slow comet, toward the spot where Sal scrabbled in the ruins. Mason cried out a warning. Sal, hearing him, straightened up and looked toward him, her back to the danger. And on came the floating swarm of sparks, each like an iridescent pearl with a core of white flame. "Behind you!" Anna shrieked, and Sal

pivoted on fat legs to see the incredible things that were seeking her out.

She froze in fear, then, and the glowing menace halted, bobbing in midair, surveying her. Then she turned and ran, and the spark-comet matched her pace—surpassed it—and enveloped her. Mason screamed heartbrokenly, and the others turned away, sick. Sal's body became a white-hot travesty of itself, a crystal statue of incredible brightness, a blindingly beautiful thing that screamed and fell writhing to the street.

Then it was over. The spark-thing floated lazily back toward the pool in the center of the city.

WHEN—after many cautious minutes of watching the pool—they finally nerved themselves enough to creep up to the spot, there was nothing left to bury. A charred black mound of dust, sifting and fluttering on the air-streams their approach had created, blew away even as they arrived, mingling forever with the ashes of the dead city.

And then, of course, they knew what had happened to Charlie, and Newsome, and Scraps.

Rory held a desperate council when they returned to the camp-site and told a shocked Brita the news. There had to be a rigid rule, from then on: Hunting in pairs only. One to watch, one to

search the ruins. Never less than two. For infracting this rule, he had to append no penalty. The penalty would come of itself.

In their haste to return, however, they'd come without the sled. Brita, unwilling to remain alone in the camp, now, went out with them to retrieve it. And it was gone.

"We can easily build another—" Mason said lamely.

No one commented on the futility of such a move. If one sled had been taken, another could be taken. It would be wasted effort.

So, at the site of the vanished sled, they split into two groups, Mason going off with Brita, and Rory with Anna. Food would have to be hand-carried from now on.

Rory and Anna, with five puny cans of anchovies—all they could garner in three hours—were back at camp a long time before Mason came back, alone, his eyes wild with shock and grief. But his news, gruesome as it was, was not all bad.

In the death of Brita he had learned a defense against the death-sparks, by the merest accident.

She had turned a corner, a few steps ahead of him, and had walked, without a chance of escape, straight into a waiting cloud of sparks. For a foolhardy moment, Mason recounted, he

thought of springing to her defense, but then, realizing the hopelessness of this, had turned and fled up the street. The swarm, leaving the scorched dustpile that had been Brita, swooped after him. In despair, he'd turned to face this certain death, his back braced against a pile of rubble, his limbs stiff with fear.

The sparks had passed him by.

Every last one of them had passed the place where he crouched awaiting death. Slowly, he told Rory and Anna, he'd started to lift himself— And the swarm, in cold white silence, had veered, turned, and come back toward him. He'd lain still against the rubble at once, forced himself to quiescence in his sudden flash of insight. And as he lay there rigid, barely breathing, the sparks drifted idly by him, as though blind, bobbing here and there, but luckily not finding him, not three feet away from their passage.

"Motion," he finished. "That's how they know there's a living thing in the vicinity. By its movement. That's why that swarm paused a moment before Sal. She'd have been safe if she hadn't run. And now, I think, we know what's happened to the rats."

"I—I don't think I could do it!" declared Anna.

"It takes courage, I know,"

said Mason. "But it's our sole defense."

Anna shivered. "Will they die out, eventually, do you think? If we can avoid them—and they eventually destroy what animal life still lives in the ruins, will they starve?"

"We can only hope so," said Mason, not knowing he was four days from his own death.

ON that day, just at sunset, the sparks came to the campsite. (Work on the bedrooms had ceased on the day Charlie and Newsome had vanished.) Their only comfort against the chilly edge growing nightly in the air was the campfire, around which they huddled in their blankets, trying to strike a comfortable medium between the warmth of the embers and the cooking sting of the smoke, edging nearer or farther away, as the breeze dictated.

Anna, the first to see the approaching glitter in the dark streets, whispered a warning to the two men, and then all three lay rock-still, trying not to tremble. The sparks hovered on the fringe of the camp, like a thousand disembodied eyes, seeking, hungering . . . But still uncertain.

Rory was the first to see Mason's danger. A trailing edge of the big man's blanket was smoking where a spurting

ember of wood had fallen. Then a circlet of orange appeared around the charred area, and a dusting of flame licked at the woolen fibers. "Mason—!" Rory risked a shout. "Get rid of the blanket!"

As though feeling the sound-waves, the sparks drifted closer, moving swiftly.

Mason gave a gasp of horror as he felt the tingle of the biting heat against his ankle, but foolishly ignored Rory's shout and tried to remain motionless. The smoldering corner of the blanket burst into dancing flame, suddenly, singeing the hair on his leg, searing the flesh. With a cry of helpless rage against the creeping fire, Mason leaped up and threw the blanket into the darkness, beat at the burgeoning aurora of relentless fires that spiraled up his legs, bit away trousers and shirt with invincible teeth of fire. He was still slapping at his garments when the white cloud of sparks engulfed him.

Anna and Rory had to force themselves to remain rigid despite his shriek of despair. He was a toppling column of white fires, and then a drifting plume of dust in the cold black night air. The group was now at its irreducible minimum. One to watch, one to search.

The next day, despite what had happened, Rory and Anna went

out to find food. She stood keeping nervous watch as he pawed through the crushed masonry and shattered wood of a small delicatessen. His toughening, scarred hands found but three unbroken containers beneath the blistered bricks, after two hours' delving.

"Three," he murmured to Anna, sagging in the debris on his hands and knees, suddenly too weary even to look her way.

"Let it be, then," she said, leaving her post at last, and climbing over the glass-strewn wreckage toward him. "Take what you have, and let's go!"

SHE pulled him to his feet, shivering despite the warm sunlight. Her eyes barely glanced at him as he straightened and began to dust the powdery pink brick-dust from his knees. He carried the precious canned goods toward the path, the narrow lane that lay like a serpent's tail through the chaos of shattered city.

Anna's eyes flickered nervously from left to right as she preceded Rory down this tortuous path, carpeted with broken stone, toward the camp.

"We shouldn't have come this near the pit," she said. "I'm afraid, Rory."

"The stores near the camp are depleted," he said wearily. "It's come this far or starve."

"I think I'd rather," she said suddenly. Then, "Here, let me carry those."

She tried not to show her panic as she took the three tiny cans from him, and took a quick look at his bony, hollow-eyed face. Rory was getting sick. Worry and hunger were taking their toll of his once-strong body. If he got worse— She'd be *alone*. Alone with the sparks.

"Almost there, Rory," she said encouragingly, as they forged their way through the nearly impassable path between the smashed walls of once-tall buildings. They were a few yards from the place where the street widened when she saw the drifting cloud that glittered in the sunlight before them. "Don't move!" she whispered, halting.

Rory, sick and weak, staggered against her, and one of the cans clattered onto the ground. The hovering cloud, sensing recent motion, began to glide down the gap toward them.

"Rory—" Anna whispered urgently, "there's no room for them to pass!" She didn't have to explain further. If even *one* spark-thing came in contact with them, and bit deep with its hot energies, the victim would be unable to refrain from a convulsive reaction. And that would attract the rest of the swarm.

There was a tilted facade to one side of them, a truncated

building-front with a sagging door still somehow in its frame, the roof and remaining walls lying in shards. "Anna," he said as the cloud drifted nearer, "to our left—!"

"We can't. We can't make it!"

"We've got to. And right now. *Move!*"

In desperation, Anna hurled the two cans she had left toward the cloud. They were engulfed in midair, and bore the gleaming swarm to earth. The spark-things clung tightly as the cans struck the surface of the path, rebounded, then rolled, even as Anna and Rory ducked into the doorway to their left.

An instant later, the swarm left the glinting tins they'd mistaken for living creatures. The induced motion had passed, and they knew there was no life to suck from the barren metal surfaces.

RORY and Anna, huddled against the inner wall of the roofless building, drew agonized breaths into their lungs, not daring to speak, nor even to tremble. Hot sunlight beat down upon them there, and then over the broken rim of the wall a spark drifted, then another and another.

Soon the broken surfaces of the building were coruscating with reflected gleams from the pearl-fire cloud that hung over

the fugitives. The sparks seemed to sense some sort of motion-potential in the two rigid shapes against the wall beneath them, and they were waiting.

A muscle in Rory's leg twitched, tightened, and cramped. He held steady. Sticky perspiration trickled down his back beneath his torn shirt, and began to generate a burning, maddening itch.

"Rory—" Anna whimpered. "They're going to *get* us!"

"Shut up!" he snapped. "They'll hear!"

A spark dipped lower than the rest of the cloud, on a slow, but steep, angle that would end against her face.

"*Rory!*" she screamed. The cloud began to follow the first spark down toward her lips.

Anna shrieked his name once more, then threw a hand before her eyes and fell forward into the debris, sobbing in anticipated agony even before the swarm descended on her like a silent avalanche of luminous hailstones.

Rory didn't even let himself blink an eye to block off the sight, a sight like having a gigantic flare go off right in one's face. Then the sparks, having fed, trickled upward into the air, glowing more gently now they were sated, leaving a blackened thing that collapsed with a quiet puffing sound into the broken stonework.

Apparently sated, the cloud drifted slowly away over the wall, and Rory was alone in the city. He turned, stumbling, and made his way like an automaton through the little swirls of dust that had been, a moment before, a young woman. He lurched through the littered streets, moving faster and faster, toward the outskirts of the city. He passed the campsite, the half-finished shelter they'd been constructing, the niche where they'd slept so many nights, and didn't even turn his head.

He was near the city limits, now. He was approaching the crest of a circular rise of ground that surrounded the city. Then he was moving down the other side, down a dirt road that led toward a group of men a few hundred yards away. A tall, greying man with gaunt cheeks was the first to see him. This man rushed up the road to him, reached out and clasped his hand.

"Congratulations, Captain," the man said. "You've done it! You've come through!"

Rory stared blankly at the other, at his sharp blue eyes, at the golden eagles on his shoulders. Then it was as if a door had been opened upon a hidden section of his mind.

"Colonel Garth!" he gasped. Then he fainted into the other man's arms.

MUCH later, Captain Roderick McKay, neatly dressed in lightweight khakis, sipped a cup of coffee across the table from the Colonel in the mess tent. They were ten miles beyond the place of their abrupt meeting, in the center of a small encampment of selected personnel.

"It's still coming in fuzzy, sir," Roy grinned, his face smarting pleasantly from the effects of a new razor and icy aftershave lotion. His hair was still an unmilitary tangle, but a barber was being sent to the camp. And all the weeks' accumulation of dust and filth had been scrubbed away. "I can remember bits and pieces, now, but there are still some blank spots in the sequence."

"It's nothing to worry about," the other man said, positively. "You'll remember everything as soon as some of the shock wears off. It's a jolt, coming back from enforced amnesia."

"What brought me back?" Rory asked abruptly. "Why did I suddenly turn about and leave the city?"

"Orders, deep in your subconscious mind, planted there under deep hypnosis," said Garth. "No one was to leave the city until the group had either revitalized itself into a well-functioning community, or until just one survivor remained. In the latter case, of course, we hoped at least

to profit by a knowledge of what mistakes were made. But don't try dredging up the facts for me; the psych-boys will be picking your brains soon enough."

"If only—" Rory said somberly, "The others—"

"Don't concern yourself with that," said Garth. "They had as much chance as you. All volunteers. You were just the lucky one. Like yourself, they had no family. It will spare us the ordeal of falsifying death certificates, making up a lot of stories to tell the relatives. They wagered their lives, and lost. When this experiment is made public someday, their names will be permanently inscribed on the country's roll of honor."

"Sir—" Rory began, "I'm afraid I'm bursting with questions . . ."

"That's to be expected," said the Colonel. "I'll give you the answers, if I have them."

"Well—about the radio . . .?"

"Jammed. We simply bombarded the area with powerful signals to blanket everything else. One radio program reaching you would have shattered the hypnosis and ruined the project. Of course, the radiation created scramble-waves of its own."

"For a picked crew," Rory said sadly, "we sure botched the job. We never *did* get around to planting, trying to raise our own food—"

"That's why my men cleaned out the supermarket," said Garth, "and swiped the sled. You people were depending too much on scavenging. In due time, of course, you would have been forced to start farming; we left a city park untouched, for that purpose, but you people ignored it, so we had to—well—*accelerate* the petering-out of ready supplies."

"We never suspected—"

"More orders, pre-planted in your minds," said Garth. "We only entered a few times, and at night, when you were all quite unwakeable, thanks to the hypnosis. I'm surprised none of you wondered over your well-rested sleeps out in the open, ~~on~~ the hard earth." The Colonel stretched and yawned. He looked at his watch, then, and sighed. "Getting late. You'd better hit the sack. A jeep will take you to the airport, first thing in the morning, where a plane will take you to Washington, and eager-beaver scientists will proceed to milk you dry. Any more questions before we call it a day?" he said, turning back the tent-flap and staring out into the dark, moonless night.

"What *are* those spark-things?" asked Rory.

"Atomic energy," said the Colonel, grimly, "in its purest form. Somehow, in the sundering of the atoms in any given blast, a num-

ber of atomic nuclei are destroyed without a concurrent disruption of their electron-rings. These rings persist, insofar as we can determine, out of sheer blind habit, even though there is no longer a core about which they must revolve. It's as though they're too 'stunned', if I may, by the explosion to know that they're free. Much as a man whose wife has suddenly died might continue to go through the motions of everyday life he has done so many times before, though no further need exists for them. And, just as this man, slightly maddened by shock, might halt strange women upon the street, mistaking them for his vanished wife, so these 'bereft' electrons seek out stability in the form of nuclei of other whole atoms. When they find such atoms, a 'fight' results between them and the electron-rings which 'belong'. The result is a pair of weak-cored atoms, along with a resultant emission of energy. The intense flare of heat produced destroys the victim."

BUT why do they attack only living creatures, or organic matter?" Rory asked. "There are atoms just as available in the bricks and metal and glass back there in the city."

"We don't know," the Colonel said helplessly. "That's why we

organized your group, left it in the city to try to cope with those things. We hoped to glean a shred, even, of more practical knowledge of the things, some defense against them. Or, by a miraculous stroke of luck on the part of the group, an *offense!* However, I can see that our latter hope was foolish; if you'd had an offense, there'd have been more survivors."

"I'm afraid," said Rory, "that the only defense we came up with was to remain motionless; they didn't seem able to recognize living things except by motion. It may be *my* fault, for not organizing things better. Who knows?"

The Colonel stiffened, then turned to face him. "I didn't follow that last bit, Captain . . . What do you mean, organizing things?"

"I mean," Rory said unhappily, "that I wasn't much of a leader. I tried working out abilities, assigning tasks—" One look at the Colonel's face stoppered his mouth like a cork. Rory began to feel decidedly uncomfortable, suddenly.

"But Major *Mason* was to have headed the group!" said Garth, angrily bewildered. "You were slated as his *aide!*"

"Sir—" said Rory, recovering the use of his voice. "Tell me about the others. Anna and Newsome and the rest. What were *they* supposed to do?"

"Wait here," the Colonel said sternly. "I have a list back in my quarters." He hurried out into the night, leaving Rory to stare dizzily into the empty depths of his coffee cup. It took only a few moments, on the Colonel's return, to see all the things that had gone unaccountably wrong.

Corporal Charles Crew, Charlie, had taken a college degree in metallurgy before being drafted. His assignment had been the casting of metals into tools and weapons.

WAC Captain Sally Marcus, with a doctorate in biochemistry, was to have organized a food-synthesizing plant, to assist in survival until the first harvest, at which time she would take charge of the group's agricultural development.

Anna and Brita Kempler, sisters who merely ranked as privates in the WAC, were to do the menial work, the cooking, cleaning, sewing.

"But *nothing* worked out as it should, then!" said Rory. "The entire group was turned topsyturvy, the wrong people in charge, the leaders trailing the followers—I" He smashed a fist into the opposing palm. "It's all coming back to me, now! If only we could have been *sent* to the city, with our memories intact—"

"Impossible," said the Colonel. "You couldn't have remained to

face the dangers there if you'd been allowed to know that the world outside the city was still alive and unharmed. But we were so *certain* that the inter-group relationships hadn't been erased along with the memory of the hypnosis!"

"So," said Rory, abruptly, "what happens to your analogy of the man in shock, behaving according to pattern? Not *one* of us acted habitually, when the group formed in the city! Yet we were *all* stunned by what we believed to be the aftermath of an atomic bombing of the city. Why didn't we conform to the pattern?"

"Because," said the Colonel wearily, "there is one *random* factor in dealing with people that cannot ever be foretold with any accuracy, I guess, Rory: Volition.

"Put a hungry dog into a cage with a porkchop, and you can predict it will eat. Do the same with a hungry man, and all you can predict is that he'll *want* to eat that porkchop; there's no certainty, however, that he will. There is no known way accurately to foretell human behavior no matter what the circumstances."

"That's *it*, sir!" said Rory. "~~That's~~ our solution to the problem of those spark-things!"

"*What* is?!" demanded the Colonel.

"The fact that a human being can ignore his natural instincts, of course!" said Rory. "These spark-things are acting blindly. If you run, they give chase. If you remain still, they bob aimlessly. What if you ran *at* them, instead of *away*?"

"Who would be brave enough to take such a risk?" said Garth.

"I would," said Rory. "I owe that much to Anna and the others."

* * *

An hour later, Rory—with Colonel Garth standing not far behind him in the littered streets—encountered a cloud of the spark-things. He stood, nerving himself, while the sparkling spherical monsters hovered before him over the narrow pathway. Then he dashed straight for them with a shout, and the entire whirl of white energy spun madly in the air, then arrowed before him, at twice his pace, back into the glowing blue pit from which they'd come.

They did not emerge again.

THE END

"I I I } WAS A SPIDER FOR

By NEAL BARRETT, JR.

Illustrator LUTJENS



THE SBI''

Here's this bit of delicate Galactic negotiation, see, and here are these, BEMs, see, and here's this beautiful Earth-girl spy, and, well, why not just read this and have a happy?



I FOLLOWED a wisp of pale blue down the long hall. It was a very leggy wisp, moving in a *most* interesting manner. Now there, I thought, is a movement I have definitely observed before. I will turn in my badge if that gauzy cloud is not partially concealing Suzanne McKitrick.

I smiled, letting the grin spread comfortably across my face. Suzanne says it's the way weasels grin when they dream about chickens. I don't know—this may be.

My azure cloud turned, disappearing down a side corridor. An interesting thing, these side corridors—I happened to know this particular one led to a single office—and that it belonged to Colonel Brain-Brain.

If that indeed was Suzanne's destination—and of course it was—then she, too, was in on the Nortch caper. The weasel grin made a brief return.

I turned the corner and jerked to a stop. The blue wisp stood before me. Its hazel eyes nailed me to the floor.

"Well, well—Suzanne! It's ah, me—Zack!"

"Yep," Suzanne nodded, "it's ah, you, Zack, all right. Figures. I've had that stark-jaybird-naked feeling for twenty minutes."

"I haven't been following you for—"

"Yes?" She let one brow form a careful arch.

"All right," I mumbled, "let's not get hysterical." I opened the door marked Spatial Bureau of Investigation and glumly stepped aside.

"Look," I said, "I can explain everything about last time. It's a perfectly logical mistake."

Suzanne stopped in the middle of the door. She was alarmingly close.

"I'll bet you were on a mission and it's classified Galactic Secret—you can't tell me any more—RIGHT?"

"I've used that, huh?"

Suzanne nodded.

"Well, how about—"

"Hi, ol' buddy!" A tall, sun-burnt giant brushed me aside like a bothersome fly and swept Suzanne into his arms. He swung her around twice then set her gently in a chair.

Suzanne stared. She gathered in floating blue gauze and frantically rearranged it in the proper places.

"No," she said numbly, "no-no-no! Not *both* of you! That's too much!"

"All right," I yelled at the giant, "just what the hell are *you* doing here?" At that moment visions of a lonely mission with Suzanne shattered with a sickening crash.

FRTZ BONNER grinned widely, stretching his six-five frame high above my own short—but stocky—five-three.

"Why, little buddy, reckon I'm supposed to see none of them Nortch picks y'all up and drags you off somewheres." He turned and let his eyes roam over the famous McKitrick figure.

"Course, I aim to take special care of little ol' Suzanne, here. Honey, you get any better look-in' I swear I'll—"

That did it. I exploded all over the place. "Take care of her! Listen, you cornpone Tarzan, you get *near* her and I'll—"

"What, shorty, what?" challenged Bonner.

"Ah—gentlemen, *please!*"

Fritz and I stopped. Then we turned and stared.

Suzanne moaned and doubled up in her chair.

"Everyone is amused, I trust?" Sure—it was Colonel Brain-Brain. Of course, his name was not really Brain-Brain, but no one could remember what it was, if they'd ever heard it. He had entered quietly—or as quietly as possible for a 300-pound man in cowboy boots, purple kilts, and a Kaiser Wilhelm dress helmet.

"Lord A'Mighty," groaned Fritz, "when you HQ folks gonna get you one uniform an' settle to it? Ain't no two alike in this whole dang beehive!"

"Now wait," I said, "don't tell

me. You're a—a sheriff, circa Nineteenth Century, disguised as the Scottish mistress of a Dutch Warlord. Right?"

"That's very funny, I'm sure," Brain-Brain sniffed. "—And it's German, Early Europe, Twentieth Century. But I did not call you here, gentlemen—Miss McKitrick—to discuss my manner of dress. We are in the midst of—"

"—a grave crisis," finished Suzanne.

The Colonel opened his mouth, then closed it, muttering darkly to himself. He eased his great bulk behind the desk and set the Kaiser Wilhelm helmet on a bust of Admiral Thomas E. Dewey.

"Now," he said, "what sort of briefing have you had on this Nortch thing?"

"As I understand it," I told him, "it's an entry job. They've got a building—and you want inside."

"Essentially, yes. But there's a little more to it. Didn't Sangor give you any background on the conference angle?"

No one spoke.

"All right," he sighed. "That's typical of Sangor. I have to do *everything* around here. Briefly it's this: A patrol got off course five months ago and discovered Nortchii. We opened negotiations, and an initial treaty conference has been going on about three months."

Brain-Brain paused. "If you've seen the pictures, you know the Nortch are sort of—well—spiders. That's the only way I can describe them."

It was a well-known anomaly that the head of the ET branch of the Spatial Bureau of Investigation had never quite gotten used to the idea of aliens. Now and then it presented some problems.

Fritz nodded. "I seen the pictures. An' spiders is it, all right—big ol' wooly ones."

Suzanne rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "Fritz, you're always such *fun* to work with . . ."

"Great big ol' wooly *black* an' *hairy* ones," I said, mimicking Fritz. I ran spider fingers lightly over Suzanne's bare back.

She shrieked. Fritz guffawed and fell over the back of his chair.

Brain-Brain sighed and folded his fingers together. "Very well. We *all* agree they are wooly, hairy black spiders. Though it is difficult to see how they could be both hairy *and* wooly. It's an academic point, but I imagine they are one or the other.—Now shall we continue?"

We nodded permission.

"Thank you. One thing we ran into in this business—quite early—was the Nortch fetish for privacy. Fetish may be an understatement. It comes closer to religious fanaticism if you ask

me. They can't *stand* to be in the same room with *anyone*—their people, our people—anyone at all. They won't speak to each other or to us. All negotiations have been carried on by—" Brain-Brain shuddered—"printed messages. Four Nortch sit in separate cubicles at one end of the room and our people sit at the other."

"I understand," he said dryly, "words are sometimes exchanged at the rate of two pages per day. Half a dozen of our people are laid up with some sort of nervous disorder. Now this alone we could handle . . ."

Uh-oh. Key word. I glanced at Fritz and Suzanne and they frowned back suspiciously. None of us had had a chance to talk this thing over—we really did not need to.

I DON'T mind saying at this point that Suzanne, Fritz and I have been through some real weirdies together. And, all visible evidence aside, we make a good team. We get results—and we come back in one piece. That's A-plus in this game, believe me.

The reason glances were exchanged is we *know* Brain-Brain, and if there is any common denominator to the cases we've been on together it is this—they are all first class stinkers.

"Nortchii," said the Colonel,

"is in Disputed Territory—a strategic point in our Cold War with the Lakk. Four days ago, those abominable rodents followed one of our couriers in and began their *own* negotiations with the Nortch!"

Mention of the Lakk always called for a full ten seconds of awed silence. Brain-Brain expected it. The Lakk represented the biggest thorn in the Bureau's side.

"Okay," I said finally, "I think I get the picture. Who does Suzanne seduce—the rats or the spiders?"

"Zack!" screamed Suzanne.

"A lass, a Lakk?" mused Fritz.

"SHUT UP!" yelled you know who.

The Admiral Thomas E. Dewey statue trembled, and the Kaiser Wilhelm helmet slipped rakishly over the famous governor-seaman's brow.

"If you don't mind," Brain-Brain pleaded, "let's get *on* with this!"

"Yeah," said Fritz suspiciously, "let's get to the part where me an' Zack an' Suzanne gets conned into doin' some damnfool stunt to cover up somethin' the Regulars didn't have no business messin' with in the first place."

"Hallelujah!" breathed Suzanne.

"Amen," I finished.

I could see Brain-Brain struggling for control. He finally

found it. His tight lips faded into a soft smile. It was one of those smiles they call 'disarming,' only brother, I was anything but disarmed. Brain-Brain always looks like that right before he announces you're going to be dropped by parachute into a volcano or something.

He shrugged his pudgy shoulders and let his beneficent gaze fall on each of us.

"If I may be permitted, I am coming to your part in this operation—and really, now, there is *no* cause at all for such childish dramatics. None at all. This is an absurdly simple assignment."

"Absurd, I can believe," said Suzanne.

Like I said, we'd flat had it, all right . . .

Brain-Brain shook his head. He paused to blot his face with a large, fluorescent bandana. "Under the circumstances," he continued, "we can't afford to wait this thing out. Too important. The Lakk are probably going as nutty as we are, but we can't count on that. If they make a breakthrough first and conn the Nortch into some kind of treaty —"

Brain-Brain shuddered. We got the general idea he'd rather not think about that.

"Sooner or later," he added sternly, "those lice heads are going to pull some dirty trick in this affair. That means we've got

to pull something sooner—and dirtier!”

BROWS went up all around. I cleared my throat, Suzanne shifted uncomfortably, and Fritz just closed his eyes. Brain-Brain usually presented a carefully-nurtured facade of a Bureau jam-packed with ethics and dignity. The facade seldom slipped. When it did, it meant ulcer time for us poor old simple field agents.

“Just what you got in mind, Colonel?” Fritz asked narrowly.

“We have to know more about the Nortch,” he said, pounding the desk for emphasis, “what they do, what they think about, what makes them tick? The easy way is out this time—completely. We can’t possibly go in there in the open. The idea of an alien wandering about the countryside sends the Nortch into hysterics.”

“So,” I concluded, “we go in *sotto voce*.”

“Exactly.” Brain-Brain leaned back and pressed a button; a large-scale map of a city shimmered onto the wall. The layout seemed fairly normal, except that each ‘block’ was laid out in an octagon instead of a square.

“This,” explained our Leader, “is Tyal—a major Nortch city four kilometers from the negotiation area. We have enlarged pictures and threedees from ten k’s up. No spy beams for anything lower. As you can see, their sen-

sor stuff is nearly as good as ours.”

Brain-Brain picked up a pointer and tapped the map. “Here, near the center of Tyal, is your objective. A great deal of activity is presently centered around this building. The Nortch go in and out at all hours—singly, of course, to avoid invasion of privacy,” he added acidly.

“We don’t know *what’s* in there, but we feel access to this area may be of immeasurable value in understanding the Nortch.”

He turned on the benign smile again, allowing each of us to soak up a healthy helping of good cheer.

“Any questions?”

At this point, Brain-Brain could have sung the Battle of Canopus Bay in the nude, accompanying himself on cymbals and kettle drum—no one would have noticed. His operatives were performing their function—operating.

Oh, sure—we’d stick the needle in soon enough, but for the moment all that was forgotten. This is what we’d come for, the thing that keeps all three of us in this low-paying, often dangerous, definitely chicken outfit: There was a tricky problem to be solved—and finding solutions to problems was the particular monkey on our three respective backs.

My way is pacing—like a short and nervous cat; eyes closed, fingers snapping out ideas. Suzanne is a lip biter. Fritz Bonner broods, head cased in those big hands of his like a stormy giant on the mountain.

Fritz suddenly looked up. "Ultronics? We could—"

"Huh-unh." Suzanne, between bites. "You thinking of walking in with a Cloak, Fritz? I figured. But if they've got what Brain-Br—the Colonel—says they have, we've a good chance of clashing our frequencies with some shield and getting ourselves scrambled like eggs."

"Wait a minute," I put in, "we've only assumed that shield, Suzanne."

Fritz nodded solemnly. "She's right, Zack. We *got* to assume. With a first-class sensor technology, they can have shields big enough to make a coupla' three omlets outa us right quick. Look. Use the Cloak all right—but *match* frequencies; come up below where you know it's not gonna be so dang heavy—"

Suzanne and I both caught that one. "A damper will—" we began, and, being a some-time gentleman, I let her finish.

"—a damper could come up with more heat than we can handle. They couldn't see us—but they'd know we were there and that would be enough."

"I WAS A SPIDER FOR THE SBI"

I COULD see Brain-Brain lean back in his chair, shaking his head slowly. I didn't like the connotation of that.

"My, my," he said, "it is simply *marvelous* to watch you three at work. I'm amazed—truly I am!"

I had an idea I was about to truly be sick.

"What you've just done is an impressive feat and I'm proud of you. You have accomplished," he looked at his watch, "in less than two minutes, what our Mark C calculated in 1/400th of a second."

We all blushed modestly. That was a pretty good ratio.

"—and rejected," he added.

I was up first. "Now just a minute, Colonel—!"

"You gonna listen to some dang machine that sits here on its hindquarters—while we—"

Brain-Brain cut Fritz off with a pudgy raised hand.

"Please . . . the compliment was sincere, Fritz. You need not arise in a body. Your combined and individual records speak for themselves. No one doubts your ability. Ordinarily, as you know, we *do* leave the *modus operandi* to the field agents concerned. Ordinarily. Believe me, though, those shields *are* good. Too good for us."

He smiled, and heaved his kilted bulk from behind the desk.

"We thought perhaps you

could use a little help on this particular case, so we turned the problem over to R&D, and they have come up with—"

As Fritz leaped for the door I shot under his arm and passed him. Suzanne snaked in on my right and tripped me and we all landed in a tangled heap.

"Now *stop* that!" screamed Brain-Brain. "Come back here and sit down! That's an, ah—well, an *order*!"

"Shoot me," said Suzanne flatly, "and get it over with."

"Me too," said Fritz.

I didn't say anything. I was hoping maybe I could slip out during the fight.

Officially, it is the job of Research and Development to develop "helpful aids to field agents." Officially. Actually, it is like you're climbing the mile-high craters on Callynx, and R&D whips up a special grease for your shoes—or you are attending a reception at the Avian legation and R&D issues a basket of fried chicken for your kit. You know, something to munch on if things get dull among the bird folk. In a nutshell, this is R&D. And a nutshell is a damn good place for them.

"All right," warned Brain-Brain, "get away from that door, Zack!"

"I resign," I said, "effective yesterday."

Brain-Brain smiled. "Effective

yesterday. Of course, that is your privilege." He busied himself with busy looking papers. "You understand that I will have to check with the Adjutant. If orders have already been cut on this case, say—like day *before* yesterday—now I'm not saying they *have*, mind you. But if that were the situation, I could not accept any resignations until after completion of your present assignment, so—"

I opened my mouth. Fritz grabbed my arm and shook his head.

"Might's well set back down, son," he said wearily. "We tried that, remember?"

"It was right after the Festar Fiasco," Suzanne added. "When R&D gave us those sex-depressant candy bars to pass out on Satyr VI."

The Colonel cleared his throat. "Ah, an unfortunate miscalculation."

Fritz cringed. "You got *no* idea, sir."

"Still," said the Colonel, "one isolated mistake, ah—"

I couldn't take it any longer. We were just putting it off.

"Okay, Colonel," I said, standing up and facing him, "I quote: 'shall we get on with it?' What have they got for us this time?"

He eyed me narrowly, then forced a smile. He pressed another button and turned to the far side of the room. A panel

slid back noiselessly. Suzanne screamed.

"Hah!" grinned Brain-Brain. "Realistic, isn't it?"

Nobody answered. It was big, hairy, wooly and black—just like it should have been. Okay, I had to admit—it *was* realistic.

"Great," I said, "what is it?"

The Colonel scowled. "What do you mean, what is it? You've seen the pictures. It's a Nortch. A full-size replica, anyway—and very well done, I might add."

Fritz scowled. "I think what Zack means ain't 'what,' but 'why.'"

"I don't like it," said Suzanne. She peered at the thing with just a slit of blue showing in her eyes. "Already, I don't like it."

Brain-Brain gave her an acid smile. "You don't have to *marry* it, Miss McKitrick."

Suzanne jerked up warily. "Oh yeah? You sure?"

FRITZ walked around the squat, hairy figure, keeping a cautious two yards between it and himself.

He looked up and scratched his jaw. "All right, we got it—now what we s'posed to do with it?"

Brain-Brain nodded. "Glad you asked, Bonner. *This* is your *modus operandi* for the Nortch Case. This is your key to our mysterious building in Tyal."

I'd been taking a closer look at

the thing—I didn't like to admit it, but I was really impressed.

"Okay," I said, "I don't like to admit it, but I really am impressed." I pointed to the single, bulbous red eye on the top of the ugly head.

"I suppose the telecams are mounted in there, right? And with all that hair you could hide about an acre of micro-audio stuff; smellers, analyzers and lint suckers." I turned to Fritz and Suzanne.

"Not bad, eh?"

Fritz gave a grudging mumble. Suzanne just sneered. "Sure, not bad. Just one question," she asked sweetly. "If they have sensor equipment equal to ours, how do we get this—this electronic tarantula within 500 miles of that building?"

"Man," said Fritz, "ain't *that* a good question?" He looked at me. We both turned slowly on Brain-Brain.

He looked kind of sick. "Well. Ha-ha-ha. Interesting point, Miss McKitrick." He shifted one pudgy foot and inspected a loose tuft in the carpet. "Actually, it's not *exactly* a real robot, you know? It's more of a, well, like a . . ."

"Come on," I said darkly, "a what?"

"Well, like a, ah—suit."

No one's mouth dropped open, no one stared or jumped up and screamed. What we did was sit

there pretending we were somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.

I tried not to look at Fritz and Suzanne. I knew they were thinking the same thing I was: Who gets elected. Which one of us pulls the honor of zipping ourselves into that thing, trotting through about a hundred-thousand *real* Nortch, and into that building where it was pretty obvious no one wanted us to go?

All right. *Someone* had to ask. "Okay, Colonel," I said, my voice hardly breaking at all, "not that I intend to have anything whatever to do with this insanity; but if I did—who is it?"

Brain-Brain frowned blankly. "Eh? Who is *what*, Zack? I have no idea what you're talking about . . ."

I took a deep breath. "You know damn well what I'm talking about! Now come off it—who is it? Which one of us gets the honor of riding that—that hairy coffin over there!"

Sudden comprehension spread over his features. "I guess I—ahem, didn't make myself clear. It's not exactly *which*, it is, ah . . ."

He stopped, and waddle over to the pseudo-Nortch. He reached under a swatch of thick fur and touched something. The whole side of the thing popped up like the trunk of a groundcar. He pressed somewhere else and the four hairy legs split spart down

their entire length. Suddenly the whole bit was pretty damn clear.

"Uh-uh, Charlie, not me," said Fritz. "No thanks."

"Ditto," I added.

"Now let's have no more of that," Brain-Brain said soothingly. "There is nothing whatever to get excited about. It is a perfectly comfortable suit, roomy, easy to operate, no moving parts—"

Suzanne jumped up, fists tight against her pretty hips. Her voice was ominously soft. "Colonel, I will not get into that thing, and that is my absolute final word on the whole ridiculous subject!"

"Suzanne, dear," Brain-Brain pleaded, "think of the service!"

"Service my eye!" she screamed. "Think of *me*! If you believe for one minute that I intend to shut myself up in that Hallowe'en suit with the tallest and smallest lechers in the known universe you're crazy with the heat!" She shot Fritz and me a fierce crimson glance.

"The Nortch," she added, "are the *least* of my worries!"

"I think I resent that," said Fritz.

"Yeah," I said, "me too."

"Anyway," Fritz glared, "you get the idea, Colonel. No offense, but you can fergit this here caper, friend. It'll be a cold day on Nortchii 'fore any of us gets suited up in that R&D overcoat."

Suzanne and I nodded firmly.

Brain-Brain shook his head resignedly and picked up his phone. "Lettie," he said deliberately, "get me the Adjutant, will you please? . . ."

—FRITZ—

MAN, was it a cold day on Nortchii! By some little ol' error, our kindly Colonel had just flat forgotten to mention how it gets kinda like about zero in the mornin' and warms up to 'round a hundred or so at noon. Tough—there wasn't nothin' for that now—if we thought about survivin' at all in the heat to come, we had to start out wearin' next to nothin'—skivies for me and Zack, shorts an' halter for Suzanne.

"You sure look nice in blue, honey," I told her.

"I'm not *wearing* blue," she snapped, "I'm freezing to death!"

So far, we hadn't seen much of Nortchii. They shuttled us from the ship to a big covered—and unheated, for some reason—van as soon as we landed and we stood around an' froze for about two hours. There was me, Zack, Suzanne and a couple of base technicians that were supposed to be checking out the suit. Mostly, they were a lot more interested in checking out Suzanne—that is, until Zack and I kinda discouraged 'em gently—like

mentionin' casual like how we'd break all their arms and legs if they didn't get back with it.

By the time we were supposed to get in our bug suit, we'd of crawled into damn near anything that was warm. About that suit—R&D has come up with some wild ones, but this topped it. Inside, there were two long poles, padded on the ends. That's where they fitted on Zack's shoulders on one end and mine on the other.

Zack an' me got these poles up, and they zipped up the Nortch legs over our own—only backwards. Oh, sure, backwards. See, that's part of the beauty of this little gem. The Nortch, bein' spiders, have reverse joints—so that meant Zack and me had to practice about a week walkin' backwards. Zack, bein' smaller, in the rear, and me in the front.

Suzanne? She was perched on a kind of form-fittin' bicycle seat between and above us. From there, she could operate the other two sets of limbs that the Nortch use for handlin' things—and she was also in charge of any seein' we might do, through a one-way imitation of the Nortch's big multi-faceted eye.

"You people ready?" It was one of our wise-guy technicians.

"What kind of answer you want from a stupid question like that?" growled Zack.

Suzanne sighed wearily.

"Okay, C'mon. Let's get it over with."

I was about to say I didn't care too much for the way she put that, but then the lid came down, the van door slid open, and Suzanne said,

"Backward . . . march!"

Unfortunately, Zack didn't get the joke, and while I started 'backing' 'forward' he started 'forward' himself. Which was certainly the right thing to do if you want to get literal.

"Hey," yelled Suzanne, "knock it off!"

The whole case just about ended right there. I figured it was a good indication of the way things were goin' to go. *It* certainly was . . .

IT'S a park, I think," said Suzanne. We'd trotted a few yards out of the van without any further incidents.

"It looks like a park, anyway. There are a lot of tall plants that look like overgrown asparagus, only with aqua feathers growing out the top."

Zack cursed. "Cut the botany, doll—do you see any *Nortch*?"

"Or worse," I added, "any of our ol' buddy cousins see us?"

"Would I be sitting here if I did?" she said sweetly. "Legs walk, Heads think. Remember?"

"I'll be dawged, Zack, we got us a lady Brain-Brain in command. Man, we are *in* luck!"

"Yeah," Zack mumbled. "That's about all we need, all right . . ."

From where I stood, which was officially Nortch Front Legs, I had one of *the* finest views ever of the legendary McKitrick figure—and I do swear, there has been no exaggeration as to its various points of perfection. Right then, I had the opportunity to see the greater part of that figure turn bright red.

"Pardon me, ma'am," I said respectfully, "Your emotions is a' shown' down here in the boiler room."

"You keep," she sneered, "your eyes *off* my emotions."

"You got the only window; there ain't a lot more *to* look at down here. Course, I ain't complainin', I—"

Zack laughed nastily.

"Forward, march . . ." she said, and things got about ten degrees cooler inside our ol' bug-mobile.

WE were on, or so our 'eyes' reported, a kind of road that led into the city. We hadn't sighted any spiders yet, but that was part of the idea—or so we hoped, anyway.

In the first place, the Nortch were supposed to be even more sensitive to the morning temperatures than we were. Our people had never seen one out before noon. The plan was, since our

spider suit was A-Number One totally *un-mechanical*—even the zippers weren't ordinary zippers—we had a good chance of gettin' into the area without any trouble.

In the second place, if you can believe anything them R&D maniacs says, we wouldn't have to worry about bein' approached to pass the time of day. That just isn't Nortch-like. Speakin' to other folks is invasion of privacy—or even *lookin'* real strong as far as that's concerned.

The way we got it, outside the home they only communicate through writin'—an' a Nortch home was about the last place we were aimin' to look into.

"Keep walking," said Suzanne softly, "here comes one—about thirty yards down the road."

"I want to say," said Zack, "how much I have enjoyed working with you people in the past, and—"

Suzanne gasped. "Shut up, Zack! We don't have any idea how well they can hear!"

Zack shut up. From my navel's eye view, I noticed Suzanne's stomach muscles start to quiver. I shut my eyes and tried to keep my mind on walking.

We were *supposed* to know what we were doing. We'd watched movies of spiders' walkin' till we were blue in the face, and I thought we had it down pretty good.

The Nortch had come a long way up the ladder from regular ol' ordinary barn spiders. The four legs they walked on, two short in back and two long in front, were set kinda close, like ours—not spread like you think about spiders. If it hadn't been that way, we wouldn't have had a chance of pullin' off this damn-fool stunt of copyin' 'em.

I figured we still probably looked kinda weird to a real Nortch, but fortunately, there's an awful lot of hair hangs down over their legs, and we'd insisted on adding another bale or two ourselves.

R&D had even tried to give us an extra break by puttin' a kind of cast on my right leg—in case anyone got the idea we didn't walk quite right. Still, I got to thinkin' I wouldn't let R&D take a splinter out of my little finger—an' I kinda lost confidence in that cast.

I figured we'd really just about had it when Suzanne sighed, and I could see everything relax.

"Okay. We made it. He didn't even glance at us. *Brrrrrr!* Fellows, listen—these characters give me the willies!"

"... Nine-hundred forty-six, nine-hundred forty-seven—"

"What the hell are *you* doing, Fritz?" said Zack.

"Countin' Suzanne's goosebumps. I'm through with the right leg, an' startin' on the left."

"Fritz," warned Suzanne, "if you weren't my Front Legs I'd kick your teeth in!"

"Good grief, leave her alone!" cried Zack. "I want to get out of this place in one—I mean, three pieces. Hey—what's happening underneath us, Head? Doesn't it seem smoother to you, Fritz?"

I paid attention for a few steps.

"Yep. A little. What gives, darlin'?"

"Well, *darlin'*," she said gayly, "you'll be happy to know the road is smoothing out because we are entering the city. Welcome to beautiful Tyal. There's about, oh—fifty or seventy-five Nortch up front—just standing around with wicked looking meat-hooks in their hands—not bothering anyone."

"You're lyin' again. We know about things like that down here in the boiler room. You ain't even breathin' hard."

"Okay, there aren't fifty—but there's half a dozen scattered over the square, so knock it off with the comments, Legs."

KNOCK it off we did. I just thought friendly things about spiders. It seemed like about four hours before Suzanne whispered:

"All right. Stop on three. One, two—three. Good."

We stood perfectly still, like we'd seen the Nortch in the pic-

tures do. No one had figured out what they were doin' when they didn't move like that; some of 'em just froze in position for hours.

R&D thought they were restin' and thinkin'—but I figured they was waitin' for great big flys. No one thought that was very damn funny.

Suzanne carefully pulled her own head down from the head area 'of the Nortch. "Everyone okay in the leg department?"

"Yeah," said Zack, "only I thought you were a lightweight, doll. What do you come to, about 375?"

"One-fifteen, for your information. The rest is Nortch." She looked at me. "What about it, Fritz? How long can you two carry me around like this?"

I glanced at my watch, then remembered it was mechanical and I'd left it on the ship.

"I figure we've been on the move an hour—we can go another if we have to, maybe two at the most. Zack?"

I saw the back of his head nod around the side of Suzanne's leg. "Okay with me. Only I'm going to have permanent grooves where these pole pads are setting. Anyway, what difference does it make? No one's ever seen a Nortch sit down, and I'll be damned if we're going to be the first to try it!"

Suzanne grinned. "Okay, we'll

get it over as soon as possible. We're in another of those asparagus parks, right across the square—pardon, the octagon, from the building. It *looks* like it's all right to go in; I've been watching it pretty carefully and I can't see any distinction between who does and who doesn't enter—but I can't tell one from another anyway, so that may be no help at all. Ready to give it a try?"

"I ain't gonna like it any better later," I said glumly.

"Me neither," Zack added.

Suzanne winced. "Great. With that high note of enthusiasm, we're off."

Her head disappeared into the upper regions, and I was left alone to contemplate the lower regions of Suzanne. That shows you how I was beginnin' to feel—I wasn't even interested in *that* pastime anymore . . .

"Oh, *no*!" cried Suzanne.

"What, what, what?" said Zack.

Suzanne lowered herself back down and crouched on the poles. Her eyes were a lot wider than they shoulda been.

"Lakk! Two of them, coming out of a building next to *our* building!"

I closed my eyes tight. "Now what are *they* doin' in here? I thought ol' Brain-Brain said they was limited to their own conference area, same as us."

"Old Brain-Brain," Zack mumbled acidly, "says a lot of things. Damnation, how do we let ourselves get *into* these—!"

"Shhhhh!" warned Suzanne. She popped up for another look.

"There's a Nortch with them now," she reported.

"*With* them!" Zack moaned, "I thought they wouldn't even come near each *other*!"

"He isn't talking to them or anything, actually. He's just—well, like *with* them. Sort of a guide or something. The Lakk are looking back at the building, and gesturing over toward *our* building. The Nortch isn't paying any attention. He's kind of—herding them on down the street, away from us."

"That's the way to go, Nortch, ol' buddy," I said, "us bugs gotta stick together against them rats!"

"Quiet! They're gone, now. Fritz, Zack—what do you suppose the Lakk are doing, right *in* the city, out in the open?"

"I was kinda wonderin' that, myself. Whatever it is, it ain't good for us. You can bet on that."

"I know what they're doing here," growled Zack. "They've signed a treaty with the Nortch! And do you know where that puts us? Three humans running around the city in a spider suit?"

I didn't feel like answering that one.

Suzanne let out a deep breath. "Well, let's decide, one way or the other. Does this change our plans? Do we go in, or go back?"

"Hell," said Zack, "in, I guess. Fritz?"

"In I guess, too," I answered, without a great deal of enthusiasm. "We don't *know* the Nortch have signed up with the Lakk—and if they have, seems it makes it even more important for us to know what's in that building. Right?"

"You and your logic," cursed Zack. "Yeah, I'm afraid it makes sense. Head?"

Suzanne shrugged and disappeared into higher realms.

"The ayes have it," she said, "forward, march, Legs—for the glory of Brain-Brain and the SBI."

"The hell you say," mumbled Zack.

ZACK and I couldn't see a thing, of course—but if you think we needed eyes to tell when we got near the building, you're dead wrong. A nose was plenty sufficient. And *that* thought started cold chills up the back of my neck: If we can smell them—how's it gonna look if they *can't* smell us?

Our steps suddenly went hollow and I knew we were in. I could hear—or thought I could—two or three Nortch pass at a respectable distance. I'll tell you

—I'm *never* gonna laugh at invasion of privacy rules again!

Suzanne suddenly did a split on the bicycle seat, kicking me with one foot and Zack with the other. It was the silent signal we'd worked out for a stop.

I waited, wondering what was goin' on up there—then the chills started up the old neck again. Suzanne was doing something with her Nortch arms. I held my breath. Here's where her long practice sessions were gonna pay off—or get us up the creek.

The way it was, there were four arms, two long and two short, like the legs. The films showed North hardly ever usin' both pair at once, and we hoped the exception to that rule would not come up. Suzanne could operate the hairy fingers of the long pair with extendables, but if the short pair were needed at the same time, she'd have to do about a double forward twist and stick her legs in the short ones and hope for the best.

The next thing I knew something was gurgling through the tube by my side into our plastic stomach. I gritted my teeth and stifled a moan.

That about tears it, I thought. The dumb broad's gone and stopped off for lunch!

Then I saw the sweat trickling down her waist, and figured whatever she was doin' was no picnic for her, either. Then we got a

kick—two of 'em—in the part of our anatomies that meant go, and bear left.

We bore left, and I almost gagged. I could see Suzanne breathing hard, and, around the side of her legs, Zack was shaking his head like he was gonna throw up all over everything. Then the smell suddenly stopped—and we got the signal to hold it.

That was about three seconds before all hell broke loose. . . .

AS best I remember, it went something like this: We stopped, there was a loud noise like thunder rolling in'over the mountains, and Suzanne whispered, "Oh, My God!"

A blast of something hit us from the right and damn near capsized us. Then another from the left. Then one from the top. Heavy red liquid started pouring in everywhere, followed by needle-thin sprays of blue stuff.

Then came the *coup de grace*. They topped the whole smelly mess off with a sandstorm full of fine green dust.

"Get us out of here!" screamed Suzanne. "Quick!"

I started forward, nearly pulling Zack off his feet. I could hear him cursing, coughing and gagging, all at once.

"No, damnit!" yelled Suzanne, "not backward, you idiot—I mean not *their* forward!"

"I WAS A SPIDER FOR THE SBI"

"I can't see to go no other way!" I choked. The green dust was all over everything now.

I reckon Zack was startin' to think again. He does that sometimes. "I get you, Head!" he yelled suddenly. "One rear window, coming up!"

Through the dust I saw his fist pull back in a long arc, then there was a sickening jolt and his arm broke through the rear of our Nortch.

Now anyone watchin' that, I told myself, will sure have somethin' to think about.

Zack took off like a big bird and Suzanne screamed and fell off the bicycle seat. I grabbed her waist as she went by and hooked one of her legs over a pole.

"Left!" screamed Zach, "now right! Right!"

I heard a yell, and it wasn't human—I knew that. Somethin' hit us hard and I suddenly had two holes full of daylight above me. I knew two things: We were outside, and our two left arms had dropped off.

"Hold on!" yelled Zack. We hit somethin' else and I heard a curse from Zack and a squeal from a you know what. We stumbled over a Nortch that hadn't had time to get out of reach of Zack's fist—then the whole side of our bug suit sprang up and hung in the air. There we were: three half-naked humans runnin' full speed forward in a back-

wards bug—or backwards in a forward bug, dependin' on your point of view.

Suzanne gasped and I turned and looked. Right quick, I wished I hadn't. It was a horrible sight.

I got a new piece of data for R&D. A Nortch can run a hell of a lot faster than a human—backwards or forwards. There were about a dozen of 'em, and little blinks of blue light came from somethin' in their hands. . . .

. . . It was dark, and Zack's face was in my face.

"Come on, Fritz! Up and at 'em!"

I was havin' a nice rest, and that didn't sound like a good idea at all. Zack kicked me in the teeth and I changed my mind.

"Glad you could make it," said Suzanne. I blinked. I could just make her out next to Zack.

"Where are we?"

Zack laughed. "See? Told you he'd have some stupid remark. Where does it *look* like, buster?"

I peered around. Well, it was done up a little different than some, but I guess the pokey is the pokey most anywhere. This one was just a little smellier is all.

I leaned back against the wall. I decided octagonal rooms gave me the creeps. "Well, crew, we sure tore that one, didn't we?"

Suzanne nodded, picking something out of her hair. I

laughed. She and Zack were both bright green.

"You're no beauty yourself, friend," she snapped. "And yes—I think we tore it—no question."

"Now that the jolly green giant here 'is with us again," said Zack, "would I be overly curious to ask just what in all the hells we ran into back there?"

Suzanne shuddered. "I'd rather forget the whole thing—but if you've got to know everything, okay. After the entrance, there was a long corridor, and at the end of that there was a kind of table with a bunch of pots on it—full of yellow squishy stuff. I didn't know whether to brush my teeth in it or toast the Queen."

"So?"

"So I didn't do anything. I stood back and waited until a Nortch came along and drank one. So I drank. And incidentally, I damn near dropped it."

"I kinda wish you had," I said. "I remember that stuff."

"After that, I went through the door where the Nortch in front of me had gone. You know the rest . . ."

Zack and I looked blank.

"Look," Suzanne gestured impatiently, "don't you get it? We're pure, clean, enobled. We've been de-fleaed, de-loused, de-ev-everything!"

"Oh, great!" Zack moaned.



"That sure is some accomplishment. We come umpty-odd light years to break into a public john!"

Zack shrugged. "They can't be all bad—they probably take baths sometimes, too."

"Not the ones I passed," said Suzanne.

"—Cleanliness," Zack went on inanely, "is an admirable trait in human or alien. You ought to try it yourself sometime, Fritz. Do you a world of good!"

"Look, shorty—!"

Suzanne jerked up and Zack and I stiffened.

"Uh-oh," I said, "Now you done it. It's the warden of this here establishment."

Whatever it was, it was big and wooly and ugly and it came to the bars and just stood there staring at us with a big red eye.

"Look," pleaded Zack, pointing at Suzanne and I, "it was *their* idea. Some of my best friends are spiders!"

Suzanne hit him in the stomach.

The warden, or whatever it was, blinked once, stood back, and let the bars slide open.

Suzanne grabbed my arm. "The more I see of this lovely cell, the better I like it," she whispered.

"I'm with you," I said. "Let ol' Zack go. I think he understands these fellas better'n' you an' me."

Zack frowned. The warden

gestured with one tentacle or arm or whatever, and we got the idea he meant 'go thataway.'

THATAWAY turned out to be a long, octagonal hall, and at the end of it, an octagonal door. He motioned us through, then shut it behind us.

It was a larger—and cleaner—room. It was dimly lit, with a kind of red-orange glow coming from the eight walls. Suzanne gasped and tightened her fingers around my arm. I turned and collided with Zack.

"Forgive the light," said a voice, "you'll get used to it. Incidentally, don't knock that 'green dust' as you call it. Probably the best flea powder in the galaxy—might have a decent export thing there, don't you think?"

We all gaped. We could see him now, a Nortch—and a big one. He was sitting behind, or about half in, what I figured was his folk's idea of a desk.

Of course, *seein'* a Nortch was no surprise—we'd *seen* plenty—but here was one of those no-talkin', no-lookin', no-communicatin' at all creatures just yammerin' away a blue streak.

He got the idea we were a little confused. One side of a red and hairy mouth opened in what I was hopin' was kind of a grin or somethin'.

"Sit down," said the Nortch,

in a pretty fair imitation of what he sure as day wasn't even close to. "Those over there, they are chairs. And I am Rajan."

I traded a quick look with Suzanne and Zack. They were right along with me. It figured the fellow'd know his own name, I'd give him credit for that. But if those contraptions were supposed to be chairs. . . .

"Thank you," said Zack politely, "the floor will be just fine."

Suzanne and I nodded.

Rajan shrugged, which was kind of sickening to see. "As you wish. At any rate, we should get on through these formalities, don't you think?—and begin drafting the treaty."

Do I need to say we sat there on the floor with our mouths hangin' open?

There it was again, that kinda' sideways grin, an' somethin' that mighta been a laugh. "Certainly," said Rajan, "that's fundamentally what you came for, isn't it? To ah—hasten the, what to you must be most fatiguing negotiations?"

Suzanne swallowed. "Under the circumstances, I think it's very diplomatic of you to put it that way—sir."

Rajan laughed, and waved an arm at Suzanne in a funny kind of gesture. To me, it didn't look like a nice thing to do, but I'm not a Nortch and can't prove it.

"Circumstances? Oh, *that!* Be assured we are in no way offended. The North are philosophers, you know—oh, no, you don't, do you? Anyway, we look upon these things in a very philosophical way. Besides, it is exactly what we *expected* you to do."

"Expected?" I asked.

"Of course. It was obvious no intelligent and enterprising race could control themselves very long under our own rather tedious and restricted behavior patterns. It must be quite nerve-racking. So, we were waiting for you. The Lakk tried it too, of course. Only their method of entry was even more insane than yours. Pardon, no offense intended at all.

"You see," he went on, "they tried to tunnel in—came right up under the Presidential Burrow and damn near smothered before we got them out! Can you imagine? *Tunneling* into a city of beings that sprang from burrowing arachnids?"

"Hah-hah!" Zack smiled sickly. "Ridiculous, isn't it?"

Suzanne groaned. "Shut up, Zack. *We* didn't do so great either—remember?"

I didn't say anything. My coating of green flea powder was beginning to itch.

RAJAN said, "I'm afraid your particular undoing is part of

a set of circumstances that led up to my initial statement. Regarding the treaty, that is. You were after us, for the purpose of alignment against the Lakk."

He paused, and—possibly—sighed. "The truth of the matter is, I must confess that *we* need you as much as *you* need us . . ."

"Sir," I said, "you're gonna have to elaborate on that. What you said already's kinda throwed us for a loop."

"I know," said Rajan, "all in good time. First, permit me to give you a quick course in world history—ours, that is. It has a direct bearing on the present situation.

"As I said," he went on, "our race evolved from a class of burrowing—I believe your word is 'spiders'? Yes. Amusing. Well, we are an offshoot of that class—the offshoot that survived.

"In the early history of our people, there was another sun above our world, a migrant visitor that established itself in a rather erratic relationship with our native sun. In those primitive times, this visitor was called The Devil Sun. Later, it was termed The Sleeper—perhaps a more accurate title as you will see.

"Every five years—as near as our scientists can now determine—this migrant sun pulled Nortchii slightly out of its path around our sun. During this

time, which amounted to three of our present months, great cold permeated our atmosphere. All creatures that did not learn to slow their metabolisms and virtually hibernate through the freezing period—were lost. As I said, we survived."

Rajan shifted in his chair. "And that brings me to the point of our discussion. So long was this a part of the lives of my ancestors, that even today, with the migrant visitor long vanished in the heavens, the Nortch are psychologically, if not physically, attuned to hibernation."

Suzanne took a deep breath. "You mean—"

"Yes," sighed Rajan, "three months out of fourteen our whole civilization comes to a complete halt while a billion Nortch retreat to their ancestral tunnels—as their forebears did for centuries. Most embarrassing."

"As you may have guessed, it is almost time again. That, my friends, is the secret of the building you entered. It is the surface entrance to our hibernation tunnels . . ."

Something was pushing at the edge of my mind. "I think I gotta pretty good idea what you're gettin' at, sir. You all must be right helpless during that time—right?"

"I thought perhaps you would see this," said Rajan. "Yes. That is the Nortch secret. We *need* the

treaty you desire. We need Earth, and men of Earth, to patrol our skies and man our beams while we sleep at the mercy of any—strangers.”

“... like the Lakk,” put in Zack.

“Yes. Like the Lakk. Long before your ship discovered us, we were aware of the thriving worlds of the rest of the Galaxy. We hesitated to let ourselves be known because of our—vulnerability. Truthfully, we were almost relieved when your arrival forced us to face this problem.”

“Be assured,” said Zack sincerely, “we will respect that vulnerability.”

“Certainly,” Suzanne added, “your secret is safe with us. As soon as we can arrange with the negotiation committees—”

“Ah—just a moment,” said Rajan, smiling broadly, “there is to be *no further negotiating*. We will take care of the details here. Now. With just the four of us.”

We all protested at once. I was loudest.

“We just can’t very well do that, sir! In the first place, we got no authority. In the second, it takes time to frame a treaty like this—!”

Rajan held up a hand. “Excuse, please, but that is just what I am afraid of. This ‘framing’ you speak of. It has unfortunate connotations in your language. No, just a simple, mutual protec-

tion agreement will suffice. About two paragraphs, I should say. We’ll split the cost of the paper, of course. It should be quite economical.”

“Ah, sir,” Zack began gently, and because of that I knew he had somethin’ up his sleeve, “you said *mutual* protection. Now, no offense, but I fail to see—”

“—how the treaty is mutual?” Rajan scratched himself with two of his legs. “Do you recall asking me to elaborate on a certain point? No, sorry, it was the other one. Forgive me, you all look alike to me.

LET me explain. Our burrower ancestry has left us with another interesting peculiarity. It is called Hunter’s Vision. What this means is that we have the ability to ferret out disguised or camouflaged creatures—came in handy for survival and food-hunting, I imagine. It is a sort of ‘infra-red sense’—hard to explain because it isn’t exactly what you’d call vision. We have that, too, of course, but this is kind of an extra—so to speak.”

Rajan laughed. “You can imagine what a start you gave the first Norch who passed you on the road to Tyal—he perceived the over-image of one of his own kind, and beneath that, two humans carrying another on a pair of poles. Hilarious. Showed great control, don’t you think?”

"Yeah," I said weakly, "I reckon it did, all right."

"But I still don't see," added Suzanne, "how this Hunter's Vision has much value to *us* in a mutual protection treaty."

"Oh, but I continue!" said Rajan. I had the idea he was warmin' up to his punch line—and enjoyin' every minute of it.

"You see, and now I once again reveal secrets to our new allies, Hunter's Vision could be most helpful. Understand, please, that it not only warns of danger present—but *indicates that which is to come!* It is no secret to anyone in the Galaxy that the Empire of Earth and the Lakk Hierarchy have been lining up the civilized worlds for some 200 years. A clash, of course, is inevitable.

"You know this, the Lakk know—and we know. But there are two things you do not know, and I am assuming such knowledge would be quite valuable. One—we sensed in the Lakk a more alien quality than you now realize. And two—we *have a most positive indication of when and where the Lakk intend to strike first.* As I say, Hunter's Vision is a very handy thing to have around . . ."

There was a small period of silence in which Zack, Suzanne and I traded quick glances. Then we gave a mutual and final kind of sigh. Well, what else *could* we do?

"I reckon we accept your basis for a treaty," I said, "but there's a few questions I think we ought to get answered first."

Rajan spread his four arms. "I am at your service."

By now, I kinda doubted that, of course. "It's this," I told him, "just how do you mean 'a more alien quality than we now realize,' when you were talkin' about the Lakk?"

Rajan smiled crookedly. "That will be explained—in time. Everyone needs a, how do you say—hole card?"

"Yes sir," Zack swallowed, "that's exactly how we say it, all right. You mind telling us this, then? What happened to those two Lakk we saw in the city? Do they know they didn't—pass your test? I have an idea they're going to be a little upset, and—"

Rajan shook his head. "Oh, I doubt that, somehow—not those two in particular, at any rate. You see, *we* were quite upset when we found them burrowing up under the city—bad for the foundations you know, unless you know what you're doing. Also, they carried a rather nasty collection of weapons, which left us little doubt as to their 'negotiating position.'"

"You still haven't answered my question," Zack persisted. "I was thinking they may have already sent the news of the treaty to their home worlds, and there's a

chance of a little friction from that."

"Friction, I'm sure of," said Rajan, "but not from ah, those two particularly unpleasant specimens."

He stretched his eight legs and relaxed, propping four limbs on the edge of his desk.

"As to what happened to them," said Rajan, "knowing the high state of civilization attained by the Nortch, and realizing the pursuit of philosophy is our natural inclination, in spite of our rather savage beginnings, you surely wouldn't believe me if I said we—ate them, would you?"

Suzanne caught her breath.

"Certainly not!" Zack said quickly.

"Good!" smiled Rajan, "Good! Spoken like a true ally!"

Just one more comment. That little ol' treaty didn't even *need* those two paragraphs . . .

—SUZANNE—

I KNOCKED once on Brain-Brain's door and stepped in. He was bent over his desk in the folds of a blue Elizabethan cape, and the plume of his purple cap kept getting tangled in his work.

I stared at him a second, as I always do—as *everyone* does—and he suddenly looked up and *really* stared back. Okay, I was wearing something cool and comfortable.

He stood up. "Why, Suzanne, how nice to see you!"

"I know," I warned, "and watch the thoughts, Colonel. I'm a pretty stable girl but you're shaking up the old psyche."

He colored and sat down. "Ah, yes, sorry, of course. Ahem—won't you—sit down, Miss McKitrick?"

"Are you kidding? First two hours on a bicycle seat, then another three in a Nortch chair—forget it!"

Brain-Brain thought about that, grinned, then shook the thought from his mind. It was a quickie, and I didn't pick up much of it—fortunately.

"I've read the reports from Zack and Fritz. I assume you have—additional information to add?"

"Naturally. What did you send me for?"

"Yes. Well, about this treaty. It is highly irregular, you realize. I hope you have some valid reason for exceeding your authority?"

"Valid enough. Essentially, everything Rajan told us is true—all he did was leave out a few 'unimportant' facts. First, they *are* great thinkers. They've reached some points in that philosophy of there's that make my head swim!

"I might add, they are no pikers at *human* psychology, either. It was a neat bit of maneuver-

ing, you know, playing on the mother-hen complex of Earth. They put themselves at our mercy and knew we'd feel conscience-bound to take care of them—Hunter's Vision or no Hunter's Vision. It's an old story—come to us and we'll smother you with kindness; trust us and we'll feed you and tuck you in and kiss you goodnight."

"Seems highly ah—dishonest to me," Brain-Brain pouted.

"Maybe. But it worked, didn't it? They got what they wanted and we got our treaty—plus a couple of bonus points. Hunter's Vision is no perfect, crystal-clear pre-cognition, by any means. But I caught enough of it to know it is definitely there—they *can* deliver the goods!"

Brain-Brain shifted uneasily and fondled the lace of his cape. I could see it coming. "You're sure, I mean—"

That made me mad. "Look," I said, shaking a bright-red fingernail at him, "you know what I can do. It's all down there in my file. I can catch surface thoughts at about 20 yards with 85% accuracy, and I can dig a little deeper up close. I'm sorry. It's all I've got and *I* didn't ask for it. It just grew. If you expected any more, why did you *send* me?"

THAT flustered him—but good. "My dear, no offense. We have just five espers in the field, and

at the time all the others—I mean—"

"Forget what you mean—I'll outdistance those jokers any day of the week! You name it!"

I smiled all over. It was going to be a pleasure to deliver today's surprise special. "As for the Nortch," I said, "I'm afraid you've got another blow coming. True. They do hibernate, all right—in a manner of speaking. But there's a small part of their philosophy they neglected to mention—out loud.

"There's a method in this madness of theirs—the idea of ignoring each other out of politeness. They are *not* anti-social. On the contrary. They are an extremely—shall we put it gracefully?—*passionate* race. At the same time, they *have* developed an uncanny, almost oriental Earth sense of self-restraint. What they are getting ready for in what I picture as a rather exotic burrow under that building—is a three-month combined binge, orgy and general brawl. Now how do you like them peanuts?"

"Damn it," yelled Brain-Brain, "I don't like it at all! We've been—well, hoodwinked, cheated—that's what! Absolutely indecent types, these Nortch. We could break the treaty, that's what we could do!"

Poor old Brain-Brain. His jowls were trembling and he was

slowly trading a brilliant red complexion for a less becoming purple.

"Oh, sit down," I said. "Nobody's getting cheated. We *did* get the bonus points—remember?"

He sank slowly into his chair, like a tired hippo retreating to the cool mud of the river bottom. "Well, yes, yes—but, well, what about all this clap-trap about migrant suns, frozen worlds—"

I shrugged. "Clap-trap maybe. Who knows? I couldn't read anything about that. Maybe there was a Devil Sun—maybe when the hibernation bit was no longer necessary they substituted something better. And what difference does it make? You've got to hand it to the Nortch. *Any* race that can save up their emotions for eleven months *deserves* a three-month orgy!"

I turned, and walked to the door. "However the thing got started, Colonel, they are plenty serious about it *now*. I suggest you do not—repeat, do not upset the appcart. Give a little, take a little. What's wrong with keeping an eye on the skies while the Nortch have a little wing-ding?"

I laughed at a sudden thought. "Old Rajan got real misty when he talked about 'hibernation.' Claimed his great age and respectability exempts him from the silent bit—that's how he

could associate with us. I suspect the old rogue is really just too ancient for the annual blow-out!"

I started to leave then, but changed my mind. I just could not resist. There was one more little matter I had on my chest. I caught the Colonel's eyes and held him—firmly bracketed.

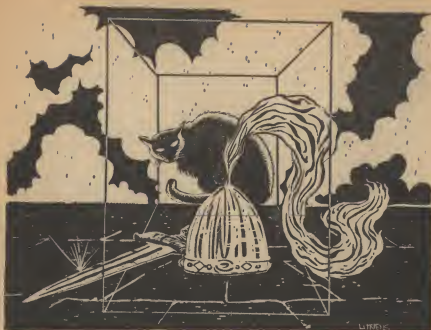
"You won't find this in my written report," I said, "because I know *that* won't get where I want it to. I'll personally handle this—later. On the way out of Tyal, Rajan pointed out two of his people bound up to a kind of automatic whipping and stinging machine. They were being punished rather severely."

Brain-Brain's eyes widened. "Good Heavens, whatever for?"

"He said invasion of privacy. I know better. Pre-festival indulgence is more like it. And I feel pretty bad about the whole thing because *we* caused it. It's another typical R&D foulup! Even with Hunter's Vision to strip away our disguise, these two characters couldn't help but admire us—openly—when we entered the city. What your bright boys did was give us just about the sexiest Nortch figure ever seen on the planet! Oh, brother!"

"Well," Brain-Brain said nervously, "we all make mistakes, don't we?"

THE END



DARKNESS BOX

By URSULA K. LeGUIN

Illustrator LUTJENS

*His doom was to fight forever in a timeless
world. Until the sea-gift opened, its contents spilled,
and death became real. But so did life.*

ON soft sand by the sea's edge a little boy walked leaving no footprints. Gulls cried in the bright sunless sky, trout leaped from the saltless ocean. Far off on

the horizon the sea-serpent raised himself a moment in seven enormous arches and then, bellowing, sank. The child whistled but the sea-serpent, busy hunting whales,

did not surface again. The child walked on casting no shadow, leaving no tracks on the sand between the cliffs and the sea. Ahead of him rose a grassy headland on which stood a four-legged hut. As he climbed a path up the cliff the hut skipped about and rubbed its front legs together like a lawyer or a fly; but the hands of the clock inside, which said ten minutes of ten, never moved.

"What's that you've got there, Dicky?" asked his mother as she added parsley and a pinch of pepper to the rabbit stew simmering in an alembic.

"A box, Mummy."

"Where did you find it?"

Mummy's familiar leaped down from the onion-festooned rafters and, draping itself like a foxfur round her neck, said, "By the sea."

Dicky nodded. "That's right. The sea washed it up."

"And what's inside it?"

The familiar said nothing, but purred. The witch turned round to look into her son's round face. "What's in it?" she repeated.

"Darkness."

"Oh? Let's see."

As she bent down to look the familiar, still purring, shut its eyes. Holding the box against his chest, the little boy very carefully lifted the lid a scant inch.

"So it is," said his mother. "Now put it away, don't let it get

knocked about. I wonder where the key got to. Run wash your hands now. Table, lay!" And while the child worked the heavy pump-handle in the yard and splashed his face and hands, the hut resounded with the clatter of plates and forks materializing.

After the meal, while his mother was having her morning nap, Dicky took down the water-bleached, sand-encrusted box from his treasure shelf and set out with it across the dunes, away from the sea. Close at his heels the black familiar followed him, trotting patiently over the sand through the coarse grass, the only shadow he had.

AT the summit of the pass Prince Rikard turned in the saddle to look back over the plumes and pennants of his army, over the long falling road, to the towered walls of his father's city. Under the sunless sky it shimmered there on the plain, fragile and shadowless as a pearl. Seeing it so he knew it could never be taken, and his heart sang with pride. He gave his captains the signal for quick march and set spurs to his horse. It reared and broke into a gallop, while his gryphon swooped and screamed overhead. She teased the white horse, diving straight down at it clashing her beak, swerving aside just in time; the horse, bridleless, would snap furiously at her

snaky tail or rear to strike out with silver hoofs. The gryphon would cackle and roar, circle back over the dunes and with a screech and swoop play the trick all over. Afraid she might wear herself out before the battle, Rikard finally leashed her, after which she flew along steadily, purring and chirping, by his side.

The sea lay before him; somewhere beaneath the cliffs the enemy force his brother led was hidden. The road wound down growing sandier, the sea appearing to right or left always nearer. Abruptly the road fell away; the white horse leaped the ten-foot drop and galloped out over the beach. As he came out from between the dunes Rikard saw a long line of men strung out on the sand, and behind them three black-prowed ships. His own men were scrambling down the drop, swarming over the dunes, blue flags snapping in the sea-wind, voices faint against the sound of the sea. Without warning or parley the two forces met, sword to sword and man to man. With a great shrilling scream the gryphon soared up, jerking the leash from Rikard's hand, then dropped like a falcon, beak and claws extended, down on a tall man in grey, the enemy leader. But the tall man's sword was drawn. As the iron beak snapped on his shoulder, trying to get the throat, the iron sword jabbed out and

up, slashing the gryphon's belly. She doubled up in air and fell, knocking the man down with the sweep of her great wing, screaming, blackening the sand with blood. The tall man staggered up, turning half blinded with sand and blood only when Rikard was almost on him. Without a word he turned, lifting his steaming sword to parry Rikard's blow. He tried to strike at the horse's legs, but got no chance, for the beast would back and rear and run at him, Rikard's sword slashing down from above. The tall man's arms began to grow heavy, his breath came in gasps. Rikard gave no quarter. Once more the tall man raised his sword, lunged, and took the whizzing slash of his brother's sword straight across his uplifted face. He fell without a word. Brown sand fell over his body in a little shower from the white stallion's hoofs as Rikard spurred back to the thick of the fight.

THE attackers fought on doggedly, always fewer of them, and those few being pushed back step by step towards the sea. When only a knot of twenty or so remained they broke, sprinting desperately for the ships, pushing them off chest-deep in the breakers, clambering aboard. Rikard shouted to his men. They came to him across the sand, picking their way among hacked

corpses. The badly wounded tried to crawl to him on hands and knees. All that could walk gathered in ranks in a hollow behind the dune on which Rikard stood. Behind him, out on deep water, the three black ships lay motionless, balanced on their oars.

Rikard sat down, alone on the dune-top among the rank grass. He bowed his head and put his hands over his face. Near him the white horse stood still as a horse of stone. Below him his men stood silent. Behind him on the beach the tall man, his face obliterated in blood, lay near the body of the gryphon, and the other dead lay staring at the sky where no sun shone.

A little gust of wind blew by. Rikard raised his face, which though young was very grim. He signalled his captains, swung up into the saddle, and set off round the dunes and back towards the city at a trot, not waiting to see the black ships steer in to shore where their soldiers could board them, or his own army fill up its ranks and come marching behind him. When the gryphon swooped screaming overhead he raised his arm, grinning at the great creature as she tried to perch on his gloved wrist, flapping her wings and screeching like a tomcat. "You no-good gryphon," he said, "you hen, go home to your chicken-coop!" Insulted, the monster yawped and sailed off eastward

towards the city. Behind him his army wound upward through the hills, leaving no track. Behind them the brown sand lay smooth as silk, stainless. The black ships, sails set, already stood out well to sea. In the prow of the first stood a tall, grim-faced man in grey.

Taking an easier road homeward, Rikard passed not far from the four-legged hut on the headland. The witch stood in the doorway, hailing him. He galloped over, and drawing rein right at the gate of the little yard he looked down at the young witch. She was bright and dark as coals, her black hair whipped in the sea-wind. She looked up at him, white-armored on a white horse.

"Prince," she said, "you'll go to battle once too often."

He laughed. "What should I do—let my brother lay siege to the city?"

"Yes, let him. No man can take the city."

"I know. But my father the king exiled him, he must not set foot even on our shore. I'm my father's soldier, I fight as he commands."

The witch looked out to sea, then back at the young man. Her dark face sharpened; nose and chin peaking crone-like, eyes flashing. "Serve and be served," she said, "rule and be ruled. Your brother chose neither to serve nor

rule . . . Listen, prince, take care." Her face warmed again to beauty. "The sea brings presents this morning, the wind blows, the crystals break. Take care."

Gravely he bowed his thanks, then wheeled his horse and was gone, white as a gull over the long curve of the dunes.

THE witch went back into the hut, glancing about its one room to see that everything was in place: bats, onions, cauldrons, carpets, broom, toadstones, crystal balls (cracked through) the tiny crescent moon hung up on the chimney, the Books, the familiar—She looked again, then hurried out and called, "Dicky!"

The wind from the west was cold now, bending the coarse grass down.

"Dicky!—Kitty, kitty, kitty!"

The wind caught the voice from her lips, tore it into bits and blew it away.

She snapped her fingers. The broom came zooming out the door, horizontal and about two feet off the ground, while the hut shivered and hopped about in excitement. "Shut up!" the witch snapped, and the door obediently slammed. Mounting the broom she took off in a long gliding swoop southwards down the beach, now and then crying out, "Dicky! . . . Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!"

The young prince, rejoining

his men, had dismounted to walk with them. As they reached the pass and saw the city below them on the plain, he felt a tug at his cloak.

"Prince—"

A little boy, so little he was still fat and round-cheeked, stood with a scared look, holding up a battered, sandy box. Beside him a black cat sat smiling broadly. "The sea brought this—it's for the prince of the land, I know it is—please take it!"

"What's in it?"

"Darkness, sir."

Rikard took the box and after a slight hesitation opened it a little, just a crack. "It's painted black inside," he said with a hard grin.

"No, prince, truly it's not. Open it wider!"

Cautiously Rikard lifted the lid higher, an inch or two, and peered in. Then he shut it quickly, even as the child said, "Don't let the wind blow it out, prince!"

"I shall take this to the king."

"But it's for you, sir—"

"All seagifts are the king's. But thank you for it, boy." They looked at each other for a moment, the little round boy and the hard splendid youth; then Rikard turned and strode on, while Dicky wandered back down the hills, silent and disconsolate. He heard his mother's voice from far away to the south, and tried to answer; but the wind blew his call

landwards, and the familiar had disappeared.

The bronze gates of the city swung open as the troop approached. Watchdogs bayed, guards stood rigid, the people of the city bowed down as Rikard on his horse clattered at full gallop up the marble streets to the palace. Entering, he glanced up at the great bronze clock on the bell-tower, the highest of the nine white towers of the palace. The moveless hands said ten minutes to ten.

In the Hall of Audience his father awaited him: a fierce grey-haired man crowned with iron, his hands clenched on the heads of iron chimaeras that formed the arms of the throne. Rikard knelt and with bowed head, never looking up, reported the success of his foray. "The Exile was killed, with the greater part of his men; the rest fled in their ships."

A voice answered like an iron door moving on unused hinges: "Well done, prince."

"I bring you a seagift, Lord." Still with head bowed, Rikard held up the wooden box.

A low snarl came from the throat of one of the carven monsters of the throne.

"That is mine," said the old king so harshly that Rikard glanced up for a second, seeing the teeth of the chimaeras bared and the king's eyes glittering.

"Therefore I bring it to you, Lord."

"That is mine—I gave it to the sea, I myself! And the sea spits back my gift." A long silence, then the king spoke more softly. "Well, keep it, prince. The sea doesn't want it, nor do I. It's in your hands. Keep it—locked. Keep it locked, prince!"

Rikard, on his knees, bowed lower in thanks and consent, then rose and backed down the long hall, never looking up. As he came out into the glittering ante-room officers and noblemen gathered round him, ready as usual to ask about the battle, laugh, drink, and chatter. He passed among them without a word or glance and went to his own quarters, alone, carrying the box carefully in both hands.

HIS bright, shadowless, win-
dowless room was decorated on every wall with patterns of gold inset with topazes, opals, crystals, and, most vivid of all jewels, candle-flames moveless on golden sconces. He set the box down on a glass table, threw off his cloak, unbuckled his sword-belt, and sat down sighing. The gryphon loped in from his bed-room, talons rasping on the mosaic floor, stuck his great head onto his knees and waited for him to scratch her feathery mane. There was also a cat prowling around the room, a sleek black

one; Rikard took no notice. The palace was full of animals, cats, hounds, apes, squirrels, young hippogriffs, white mice, tigers. Every lady had her unicorn, every courtier had a dozen pets. The prince had only one, the gryphon which always fought for him, his one unquestioning friend. He scratched the gryphon's mane, often glancing down to meet the loving golden gaze of her round eyes, now and then glancing too at the box on the table. There was no key to lock it.

Music played softly in a distant room, a ceaseless interweaving of notes like the sound of a fountain.

He turned to look at the clock on the mantle, an ornate square of gold and blue enamel. It was ten minutes of ten: time to rise and buckle on his sword, call up his men, and go to battle. The Exile was returning, determined to take the city and reclaim his right to the throne. His black ships must be driven back to sea. The brothers must fight, and one must die, and the city be saved. Rikard rose, and at once the gryphon jumped up lashing her tail, eager for the fight. "All right, come along!" Rikard told her, but his voice was cold. He took up his sword in the pearl-encrusted sheath and buckled it on, and the gryphon whined with excitement and rubbed her beak on his hand. He did not respond.

He was tired and sad, he longed for something—for what? To hear a music that ceased, to speak to his brother once before they fought . . . He did not know. Heir and defender, he must obey. He set the silver helmet on his head and turned to pick up his cloak, flung over a chair. The pearly sheath slung from his belt clattered against something behind him; he turned and saw the box, lying on the floor, open. As he stood looking at it with the same cold, absent look, a little blackness like smoke gathered about it on the floor. He stooped and picked it up, and darkness ran out over his hands.

The gryphon backed away, whining.

Tall and white-armored, fair-haired, silver-capped in the glittering shadowless room, Rikard stood holding the open box, watching the thick dusk that dripped slowly from it. All around his body now, below his hands, was twilight. He stood still. Then slowly he raised the box up, clear up over his head, and turned it upside down.

DARKNESS flowed over his face. He looked about him, for the distant music had stopped and things were very silent. Candles burned, dots of light picking out flecks of gold and flashes of violet from walls and ceiling. But all the corners were

dark, behind each chair lay darkness, and as Rikard turned his head his shadow leapt along the wall. He moved then, quickly, dropping the box, for in one of the black corners he had glimpsed the reddish glow of two great eyes.—The gryphon, of course. He held out his hand and spoke to her. She did not move, but gave a queer metallic cry.

"Come on! Are you afraid of the dark?" he said, and then all at once was afraid himself. He drew his sword. Nothing moved. He took a step backward towards the door; and the monster jumped. He saw the black wings spread across the ceiling, the iron beak, the talons; her bulk was on him before he could stab upwards. He wrestled, the great beak snapping at his throat and the talons tearing at his arms and chest, till he got his sword-arm free and could slash down, pull away and slash again. The second blow half severed the gryphon's neck. She dropped off, lay writhing in the shadows among splinters of glass, then lay still.

Rikard's sword dropped clattering on the floor. His hands were sticky with his own blood; he could hardly see. He groped his way to a chair and sat down. Then, as he had done on the dune-top after battle, he bowed his head and hid his face in his hands. It was completely silent. Only one

candle still flickered in its sconce. Rikard raised his head.

The gryphon remained still.

"It's dead," said a small soft voice, as the witch's cat came picking its way delicately among the fragments of the smashed table. "Once and for all. Listen, prince!" Rikard stood motionless, blank-faced, till a sudden sound made him start: a little ting! nearby. Then from the tower overhead a huge dull bell-stroke reverberated in the stone of the floor. The clocks were striking ten.

There was a pounding at his door, calls and commands echoed down the palace corridors.

"You'll be late for the battle, prince," said the cat.

Rikard groped among blood and shadow for his sword, sheathed it, flung on his cloak and went to the door.

"There'll be an afternoon today," the cat said, "and a twilight, and a night will fall. At nightfall one of you will come home to the city, you or your brother. But only one of you."

Rikard stood still a moment. "Is the sun shining now, outside?"

"Yes, it is—now."

"Well, then, it's worth it," the young man said, and opened the door and strode on out into the hubbub and panic of the sunlit halls, his shadow falling black behind him.

THE END

WITCH of the FOUR WINDS

By JOHN JAKES

Illustrator FINLAY

Part One of Two Parts



Nordica the Fire-Haired, looked with favor upon the strong body of the barbarian, Brak. His power embodied the last element she needed to close the circle of the Four Winds. In the Tradition of Conan, here is a ringing novel of sword and sorcery.



FOR three sunrises the land had risen steadily up, out of a lush and pleasant river delta to this forbidding region of gray slate, withered shrubs and distant thrusting peaks whose summits hid behind blowing clouds of mist. The land was lonely, as if nothing human dwelled there.

The road Brak travelled wound this way and that, serpentine. Dust whirled in tan clouds. The sun now hung halfway to the zenith, a metal-colored disc. And Brak had passed no other human soul in a full day's time. So when the scream ripped out on the low-moaning wind, he started violently.

He grabbed for the hilt of the mighty broadsword hanging at his waist. "That would be a human voice," he muttered to his pony. "And a woman's. Or is the wind tricking me? Nothing seems to live in this desolation."

The pony obeyed the pressure of Brak's knee and halted. With his chin lifted the yellow-haired barbarian sat listening. Veils of dust obscured the tumbled hillsides where huge stones leaned at crazy angles, as if whatever sinister gods ruled this kingdom—a kingdom whose name Brak did not know—had decreed disorder as the rule.

Presently Brak convinced himself that the wind had indeed de-

ceived him. He was ready to ride onward. He was anxious to put this sinister countryside behind as quickly as possible.

High and sharp, the scream reached him again.

Brak jumped to the ground. He left the pony standing at a bend in the rocky road. His broadsword glinted in the hazy sunlight as he loped upward between boulders. Now he was convinced. The scream was unmistakably human. Unmistakably female. And unmistakably terror-stricken.

Brak localized it as coming from a slate bluff to his right. The base of the bluff was concealed by the massive boulders between which Brak scrambled down. Then he neared the last rock rampart and jerked up short.

The scream broke out a third time, desperate, wailing. Brak saw no paths open between the last rocks. He slammed the broadsword back into its scabbard and leaped high.

His powerful fingers found holds on the tallest rock. He went scrambling over with a lithe, animal agility. On the rock's top he shielded his eyes a moment, a giant man, wide-shouldered and naked save for two garments: a lion's hide about his hips and a wolf-pelt cloak worn against the chill of the upland nights.

FOR an instant Brak wondered what witchery he'd stumbled upon. No woman was in sight near the cliff base. Instead he saw a pillar of rock, bluish-colored, shot through with flecks of sparkling mineral. The pillar was twice Brak's height. Winds and weather old as time had fluted and sculptured it into a peculiar shape—wide at the bottom, then narrowing until it flared again at the top.

Upon this pillar, cross-legged, veined arms folded over his spindly chest, sat an old, old man.

A coarse gray robe, tattered and faded, protected his emaciated chest and shanks. Little of his face showed. His hair, cheeks and chin were one continuous tangle of hoary growth. The man's appearance tempted Brak to laughter. The man's face kept Brak silent.

The old man sat with head thrown backward. His eyes were pressed shut. His lips formed a white line. He swayed, as if possessed or in a trance.

Brak clambered down the face of the rock, muttering to himself, "A warlock? Imitating a woman's yelp to frighten travellers. Or perhaps attract them. That's it. Probably there are robbers lurking close, ready to pounce on this very—"

Again the scream came, blown on the softly keening wind.

Brak gazed past the pillar of

rock where the old creature swayed back and forth, hugging himself, lost in dreams. At the base of the cliff Brak now noticed an opening, half hidden behind another jumble of stones. The scream had issued from that cave mouth.

Brak passed the pillar in great, loping strides. He spied a shepherd's crook carved from wood, lying on the ground. If brigands set a snare for the unwary, they did so with strange equipment.

Sword hand ready, Brak took a step into the dark of the cave. An odor washed over him and Brak's mouth wrenched. The smell was the stink of decay, a green-black stench of primeval slime rotting away. The odor drifted from the dark ahead.

Just then he heard the whimpering of the woman, steady and forlorn. Then there was another sound—the frenzied howl of an animal. Yet no animal's noise had ever sounded so loudly in Brak's ear before. It hurt his ears and set his heart thumping.

There was one instant when Brak's instincts rebelled. They warned him to turn and flee from the narrow cave. There was a thunderous cracking ahead, with an echo following. The earth beneath Brak's feet shook faintly.

What lived down below? What sent up those bleats of blood-hunger and rocked the mountain with its thrashing?

NOW Brak's eyes had accustomed to the gloom, which was relieved only by the dim light from outside. Brak saw that the cave angled downward until it seemed to end not far ahead.

With one hand pressed against the damp wall and the other tight on the broadsword hilt, Brak crept forward. The roaring came again. It seemed to rise from the blackness where the tunnel floor ended. A pit?

For several moments Brak had heard no sound from the woman in trouble. All at once, as he neared the pit's lip, another moan reached his ears. Quickly he belied down, crawled to the edge, stared over.

Far below, two great scarlet spots shone.

Eyes? Eyes that huge? In the head of what kind of creature? Certainly no kind Brak had ever encountered before.

Closer at hand he saw the woman. More precisely, a girl only slightly younger than Brak himself. Lying near Brak was a crude woven sandal with a snapped thong. Whoever she was, the girl had tumbled from the pit edge down a short incline to a narrow shelf. There she clung, an indistinct figure visible mainly because of the whiteness of her tunic and her face.

She had not seen Brak. She was staring down into the cavern where the red eyes smoldered.

"Girl?" Brak called it softly, so as not to startle her. "Girl, look up here! I think I can reach you."

Her face lifted. Brak heard a gasp, a rattle of stones as her bare foot slipped. Rocks cascaded off the narrow shelf. Long moments later they struck far down, with dull echoes.

The girl kept staring while the thing in the pit flicked its red eyes open and shut, open and shut. It bellowed. The earth vibrated when it moved. Brak's belly churned with fear. The dead, decayed smell boiled up from the pit's bottom.

"Hold out your hand," Brak called.

"It's too far," the girl called. "I'm frightened of letting go."

"There's no other way. Hold with one hand, reach with the other."

The girl hesitated only a moment. Then she extended her right hand. Brak braced his mighty legs, stiffened his belly against the rim of the pit, thrust his right hand downward. The girl sobbed.

Their hands were a sword-hilt apart.

"Stretch on your toes!" Brak groaned with the effort of reaching. "A little higher—"

The girl fastened her left hand more tightly about the outcrop of rock she'd been gripping. Brak tightened the muscles of his legs

until they ached, forcing himself forward another fraction, until the whole of his torso hung over into the blackness. Only the strength of his legs and the grip of his left hand around a rock imbedded in the tunnel floor kept him from falling.

THE ghastly red eyes, huge as midsummer moons, had opened again. They watched, watched from the black where the stench drifted. Out of the pit blew more than a smell. Out of the pit came some nameless, ancient evil palpable as a cloud.

Brak's face twisted as the gap between hands closed. Sharp rocks poked his belly, his thighs, little shafts of pain. His shoulders ached. Groping upward for his hand, the girl lost her balance.

She cried out. She started to fall. Brak thrust his whole body forward and caught her fingers.

Weight wrenched Brak's arm. "Hold fast," he breathed. "Hold fast a moment more—" For he had her now, had his fingers around her fragile wrist. What remained was the task of pulling her upward. He prayed for the strength to do it.

The girl dangled in space above the shelf. Brak knew he was hurting her. Slowly he began to tighten the muscles of his arm and lift her by sheer force.

His vision blurred. He bit his

mouth until he tasted his own salty blood.

Higher. A bit higher.

Abruptly the rock to which he'd been clinging with his left hand shifted, torn out of its bed by the weight pull of Brak's hold. Brak went rigid in an effort to keep from tumbling off into the pit. The girl's wrist slipped from his fingers.

For a timeless instant the yellow-haired barbarian knew that death was upon him, and the girl too. In the black heart of the earth where the red eyes watched, a roaring started again. A blast of welcome for the victims. The beast knew that death was near, too.

Then, as though some alien river had swept into his great body, coursed through it, foamed through it with new life, Brak's right arm began to shudder and burn.

Power filled it. Power so overwhelming it was pain. With a tormented cry Brak closed his hand more tightly around the girl's flesh, wrenched backward and up on his knees.

Blood beat in his temples. His eyes blurred. But his right arm was beyond all weakness, possessing a strength he knew dimly was not his own.

The girl's head appeared at the pit rim. Brak risked freeing his left hand from its weak purchase on the loose rock. He caught the

girl around the waist and wrenched again.

Man and girl fell in a heap, panting for air.

A MOMENT later Brak rose. The peculiar flame-like pain in his right arm drained away. A tingling remained, as of tiny knives pricking the flesh. Then this too waned.

Meantime, the girl had risen. She stared at the vast black gulf just a step away. Then she faced around.

In the dim grayness of the tunnel Brak noticed that she was young. She was also quite pretty. She had an oval face, a wide, soft mouth and large dark eyes. Her brown hair, a bit tangled by her ordeal, hung to her shoulders. Despite her youthful slimness, a womanly figure was apparent beneath the plain white wool gown held around the waist by a thin leather girdle.

The girl's face showed wonder. "I was falling. Falling to that—thing below. We were both falling, both lost. Yet I stand here now. And so do you."

A quizzical smile stirred Brak's mouth. "Girl, I'm as surprised as you. My arm is strong enough, but not that strong."

"Then how did you manage?"

"I don't know."

A lizard poked its scaled head from a niche in the wall. It blinked, drew back. The stench

from the pit began to sour Brak's belly again. There were too many mysteries in this weird hole in the earth to suit him. Not the least was the brief, inexplicable burst of strength that had surged into his arm at the critical moment.

He took the girl's hand. "We're free, anyway. Let's talk in the light."

Together they hurried from the cave. The girl's eyes widened as she noticed Brak's size, his girth, the savage cast of his features. His yellow hair and lion-hide waist clout flapped in the wind.

The girl's breathing grew more regular. But she clung near the wall of the bluff, huddling, either shy or frightened.

"I'm called Brak. I was riding along the road when I heard you cry out."

"From your looks, I'd guess you come from far away."

"The high steppes to the north. The wild lands. Leagues away. Who are you? And how is it you came to be scrambling in that hole? It must run down to hell itself."

"No, only to the place where the Manworm lives."

Brak's spine prickled under the wolf-cloak. "Manworm?"

"That is what they call it in this country. No one's ever come back from below to describe it."

"Something left from time's

beginning," Brak muttered. "It smells that ancient, anyway."

"I did not go into the cave because I was curious," the girl said. Her glances and her speech grew more nervous every moment, as if Brak's maleness frightened her. She picked up the fallen shepherd's crook. "My name is Elinor. I live far above, on those slopes." She indicated the peaks towering into the mist. "I was raised by my father. He tended sheep, as I tend them now that he's dead. Once every sixth full moon I take them to market at the crossroads."

"A lonely life for a girl as young as you."

"The only life I know. It's better than living among the people, if the tales I hear at market are true. Anyway, this morning one of my ewes ran off. I followed her down from the mountain. She wandered into the cave and, as I went after her, fell to the Manworm. My sandal broke and I fell too. Somehow I landed on that little ledge. I was so terrified, I screamed and—and now I thank the gods I did."

SHYLY she glanced at the big man. Her cheeks colored, as if speaking the way she had was somehow an immodest act.

"This country seems full of peculiar things," said Brak. "In return for my help, Elinor, will you tell me more about the Man-

worm? And about the old man yonder on the rock needle?" Brak shielded his eyes. "He's still asleep, it seems."

Elinor's eyes rounded. "Asleep or—venturing somewhere."

"Venturing?"

"His name is Ambrose the Pillarite. Day without end he sits there, dreaming. A market buyer told me once that Ambrose has strange powers. That he can send his mind wandering. Where, I don't know. Perhaps into visions."

Brak stood up. He used the edge of the wolf-pelt cloak to swab some of the blood from his belly where sharp stones had broken his mahogany-tanned skin. He said:

"I set out long ago to ride to the warm climes of Khurdisan far to the south, to seek my fortune. I follow the road where it leads. This time it seems to have led into a forbidding realm indeed." Bothered by the shepherd girl's nervousness, Brak smiled. "But it was good fortune that brought me past here today."

Stepping forward, he only meant to indicate friendliness. Elinor took it differently. Perhaps the initial step in claiming a crude reward. Brak sensed this at once, but it was too late. She snatched up her crook.

"I thank you, Brak, for your bravery in saving my life. I will say a prayer at the grotto on the

summit, to help with a safe journey. Now I must go back. There are wolves in the foothills, and the flock is alone.'

"Wait!"

"No, I must go."

"Before you do, at least tell me where to find an inn—"

"Thank you, Brak, thank you."

The shepherd girl's cry drifted on the wind as she vanished around the corner of the bluff's base.

MOMENTARILY angered, Brak ran after her. He caught a glimpse of her as she raced, fleet and agile, up the rocky hillside toward peaks where dark green patches of foliage shaded off to stone the color of pearl. The girl had a head start. Brak would never catch her.

With a muttered oath about the fickleness of women Brak turned around. The hackles on his neck stirred.

Brak was positive he was being watched.

Ambrose the Pillarite still swayed on his slender perch. Beyond the needle of rock Brak saw a dull wink-and-flash, as if a brazen helmet had been swiftly drawn back behind the cover of a boulder.

Unseen watcher? Another riddle. Brak had enough for one day. He hauled out his broadsword and charged up the rise.

Leaping around the rocks, he bolted into a narrow little defile. He was positive the watcher or watchers had been crouching there. But the defile was empty.

Brak knelt down. He ran a thick finger over the hard surface of the ground. No trace of a human footprint.

He listened. The wind sighed. Above the sound, Ambrose the Pillarite moaned, and gave one sharp, painful cry.

That cry decided Brak's course. Perhaps he could waken the old man and receive some answers to his questions about this strange country. Not that he intended to remain long within its borders. But his curiosity overcame him.

Tramping back along the defile, Brak was sure he'd imagined the watcher. Doubtless the flash of light was the gleam of the dull sun breaking through the clouds a moment.

Clutching his broadsword, Brak walked down to the base of the pillar. Ambrose was awake. He regarded Brak with rather dazed amber-colored eyes. The eyes looked oddly young, Bright, in contrast of the seamed face.

"So you finally woke up," Brak said.

"Somewhat, somewhat."

"Are you wakeful enough to understand what I say?"

"Sleeping is sometimes waking. And sometimes not."

"Whatever that means. Old

man, my name is Brak. I'm a foreigner riding through this country. While you took a nap, I could have used your help. A girl fell into the pit in the cave yonder."

The hermit's eyes cleared. They focused sharply on the brawny man standing below him. "Yes. The shepherd girl from the hills above us. Her name is Elinor. She was chasing a lost ewe."

"For a man with his eyes shut, you seem to know a great deal about what happened."

Quickly the amber eyes grew veiled. "Don't question your good fortune too closely, barbarian."

"What good fortune?"

"Never mind. There is no other female in this district who might have wandered into the cave by accident. No one lives nearby save Elinor. Then since the girl in the cave was Elinor, she must have been hunting one of her flock. That you saved her by dint of your strong arms—"

The Pillarite's gnarled lips seemed to twist in some private mirth. "—is also evident since she is not here, yet you are calm. You would not be calm had she fallen to the Manworm."

THE name made Brak completely forget to ask Ambrose how he knew Elinor had been chasing a female sheep. "Manworm," he said. "What is it, old one? A serpent?"

Ambrose the Pillarite nodded. "Partly. Yet its brain is far more cunning. It's a huge, slime-covered thing, the last of its race. It's been alive in that cavern for centuries past all remembering. The Manworm is one of the reasons this land is double cursed."

Before Brak should speak the old man's eyes flared. "Take to your pony, barbarian. Mount up and don't look behind. Ride southward as you planned. This is an evil place, an evil time. Here, of all the pockets and crannies in the known world, the Manworm still screams and shakes the earth. Here, the murder of Celsus the alchemist has loosed havoc, and the beast Scarletjaw as well. Ride away, barbarian. Ride away from damnation."

The moment remained forever imprinted in Brak's brain: the old man on the needle-throne of rock seemed frail and harmless except for the amber luminescence of his eyes. Those eyes seemed to reach through Brak, and far beyond, encompassing all of known time and many dark threats Brak did not understand.

Brak was suspicious of Ambrose and his ready explanations. The anchorite knew too much about him. That he rode a pony. That he sought Khurdisan in the south. What was the exact nature of Ambrose's clairvoyance?

Of a sudden, Brak wondered whether the sudden, inexplicable

rush of strength into his right arm could somehow be connected with the anchorite's peculiarity. If so, how? The strength had poured unbidden into Brak's arm, but where it had come from was a mystery. Unless Ambrose's mind—

Confused, Brak shook his head. His spine crawled a little too, not in fright so much as in awe.

"I don't understand all you say," Brak growled.

"Better so," Ambrose said, a trifle querulous himself. "Have I not warned you sufficiently?"

"Old man, I'm not a child. I have fought for my life a hundred times. If the winds of bad fortune blow my way, at least I'd like to know from which quarter of the sky they come."

The Pillarite smiled wanly. "The sky? The winds? Odd you speak of them. In not many days, the winds in this country will rise. Rise and shriek and blow as they do nowhere else in the civilized world, Khurdisan or Babylon or even the hot deserts of Egyptos. They say *she* will call on the winds. That the winds are part of her magic."

Furiously Brak stamped his foot. "Enough of your cursed riddles! Who'll call on the winds? That shepherd girl? And who is Scarletjaw you were prattling about a while ago? And someone named Celsus who was murdered? Old man, be civil and an-

swer me or I might take my sword and—"

The mortal screams of Brak's pony tore across the jumbled hills.

The anger, rich and hot, that had been beating high in Brak quickly waned. His cheeks turned white. He raced down among the rocks, broadsword whipped out of the scabbard and shining in his massive hand.

Bursting from between two boulders, Brake cursed and goggled in disbelief. In the center of the twisting road lay the remains of his pony, all bones and entrails and weltering, bubbling blood that turned black where it seeped into the earth.

Distantly Brak heard a jingling, a bronze-shod clatter. He ran to the bend in the road and stared.

Away from where he stood, a brazen chariot thundered, drawn by black horses. And behind, in the alien air of this wild country lingered another stink even worse than that which had risen out of the Manworm's lair.

The aroma was a kind of warm, hairy stench such as caravan dogs possessed. But it was much more intense, and tainted with blood-smells. Brak knew then that some kind of dog had ruthlessly torn his pony apart.

But what sort of dog could destroy an animal three times its size?

No dog could do that. Not unless—Brak shuddered, hate thickening his blood—not unless the dog, like his stench trailing out behind, was of larger-than-normal proportions.

The dog-stench, poisonously strong, drifted deeper into Brak's brain, never to be gotten out so long as he lived. The chariot vanished in dust around a bend.

Brak plunged back up the hillside. "Old man! *Old man!* A chariot passed. Some kind of animal—"

Under the fluted rock pillar Brak stopped. His shoulders slumped. Again a sense of evil engulfed him.

Ambrose the Pillarite had closed his eyes. He was swaying again, and crooning to himself. Brak shouted at him a while longer, with no result. Brak's shouts rang off the slate cliffs, the sun slid under a cloud, and gloom settled on the day.

CHAPTER 2

The Beast Of The Caravanseri

AFTER Brak gave up trying to rouse the dozing mystic, he unbuckled his broadsword. He slung the scabbard across his shoulder and set off down the twisted road in the direction the chariot had taken. This was the same direction Brak himself had been travelling, before Elinor's cry rang out.

Soon Brak arrived at a cross-roads. A peasant's wagon drawn by oxen lumbered by. The peasant informed Brak, whom he eyed with considerable suspicion, that a right-hand turning would bring him to another junction. There stood a caravanseri.

"The hostelry isn't very crowded nowadays," the peasant said. "The Phoenicians and the traders from Crete no longer send caravans as they did a year ago. Word travels swiftly when evil times come."

"What ails this land of yours, farmer?"

"Nothing I care to discuss with a stranger. Too free a tongue can bring black evil spirits swooping down. Good day." The peasant lashed his oxen and the cart lurched away.

Puzzled, Brak strode on. The new road seemed better-worn than the one which twisted through the high hills. Brak was now in a shallow valley ringed with snowy mountains. Through a pass in one of those mountains Brak had ridden at sundown the preceding night.

Here and there in the valley Brak spied a lonely cottage. A woman gazed at him from an arbor, then made the sign against evil eye and turned her back as he strode by with a long, loping gait. Even the fields looked poor and benighted. Perhaps at the caravanseri he would learn what

sickness gripped the land. After the peasant's cool reception, Brak had given up on asking questions of the few laborers he saw in the fields.

A swollen red sun broke through the clouds at twilight as Brak arrived at the next junction. As the peasant had promised, a caravanseri stood on the site. The buildings were ramshackle. A string of tick-infested donkeys waited in the yard, where a dung-smell hung heavy. The drivers of the donkey caravan, swart southern men with curled beards and gold hoops in their ears, occupied a single table inside the main building. They swilled sour wine, argued among themselves in singsong voices and treated Brak to unfriendly stares as he arrived.

"Will this buy a joint of meat, and wine, and a place to stay the night?" Brak asked the spindly innkeeper. Brak spun one of his last few dinshas, which he had taken from his lion-hide clout, onto the serving counter. The coin rang sharply in the sudden silence.

"'Twill buy you half the space of this inn, stranger, since it goes begging night after night. Did you ride in? We'll look to your horse."

"I looked to my horse myself. I buried what was left of him, on the road, a good ways back."

THE spindly man eyed Brak with curiosity. "You must be passing through our sweet land by chance, not choice. You're an outlander."

"From the steppe country, far north." Brak accepted the goat-skin of wine the host passed over. He tilted it back. He drank long and deeply. Then he wiped his mouth with his forearm, continuing, "This is not a prosperous kingdom."

"Aye. Once—little more than twelvemonth ago—this land was fair and bountiful. Oh, not the richest land by any means, judging from what the traders tell me. But we lived decently, and with pride. All that has changed."

Brak's thick eyebrows knotted together. "What happened? Did a new ruler take power?"

"No, the same lord rules us. Strann of the Silver Balances."

"An unusual name."

"Strann is so called because all disputes were swiftly settled, and the peace was kept, through his tolerance and wisdom. But he is growing older. And his army is small: What few soldiers he has at his command are helpless."

"Why helpless, landlord?" What has stricken this place like a plague?"

"Terror," said the innkeeper, whispering. "Terror of things unknown and awful."

Brak smacked his broadsword

resting on the rough planks. "I have met few terrors *this* could not rout."

The innkeeper sighed, a futile, sad sound. "Try thrusting iron through a wraith. Through a witch. Through an animal with hide as tough as—" The man caught himself, shook his head. "There's no use in attempting to explain what cannot be explained. How do you explain magic?"

"An Army helpless because of magic? A kingdom the same way?" Brak snorted.

Shrugging, the innkeeper glanced into the cobwebbed shadows of a corner, as though a threat lurked there. Then he hurried away to answer the calls of the bearded drivers huddled at their table under one of the leaded windows.

Brak slung the goatskin over his forearm. He sat at a table, even though being indoors did not seem a natural thing to him. Confinement was alien to his nature, to the way he'd lived on the high steppes before setting out to seek his fortune.

He drank and mused over the innkeeper's cryptic remarks. The landlord's reticence began to annoy him greatly. He was ready to try questioning him again when a clink of armor and shields drew his attention to the yard.

A patrol of soldiers was riding in. Perhaps two dozen in all, they

were a ragtag, dispirited-looking lot. The commander was a tall, black-bearded man of stout body. His trappings seemed in better repair than those of his men.

The commander ordered his troops to dismount. Murmurs of discontent, surly complaints reached Brak through the open window beside which he sat. The innkeeper hurried outdoors.

"Welcome, lord Iskander."

"We'll sleep within your walls tonight," the commander returned. "Fetch a wine ration for the men."

"At once. Did you find the missing ones?"

Iskander swept off his plumed helmet. "No. Likely as not they all deserted, rode up to her castle to offer their swords. Even these fine specimens—" Iskander jerked a thumb. "—threatened to mutiny if I forced them to march in pursuit. Therefore we compromised, and returned here for the night. Many more desertions and Lord Strann will have no army at all."

So saying, Iskander shook his head and retired to a corner of the caravanseri yard, where he sprawled out to await the arrival of the wine.

AFTER several draughts he closed his eyes. He appeared to sleep. Brak sat watching the troops whisper among themselves. In his travels he had seen

many armies, many soldiers serving various monarchs and potentates. But never had he seen any fighting men as demoralized as these. As the twilight gloom deepened they seemed to huddle closer together, keeping their weapons close at hand.

Finishing the goatskin of wine, Brak rose. He meant to go converse with the soldiers. He had just reached the doorway when the army horses, already stables out of sight, began to stamp and whinny.

Instantly the commander jumped up. He pulled his sword. There was a ferocious splintering of timbers somewhere. Then one of the military geldings thundered into sight, apparently having smashed out of his stall.

Iskander leaped out of the way. He was nearly trampled as the beast plunged on through the caravanseri gate, mane streaming, eyes white and huge as moons.

Wheels creaked out in the gathering darkness. Orange flickers licked over the dirt of the yard. The firelight came from a pair of torches mounted in brackets on the rim of the chariot's car.

The chariot wheeled to a halt in the gateway. Brak's gut tightened then. Pawing and blowing, the pair of pure black horses hitched to the chariot joggled restlessly in their traces.

Several of the soldiers had raced to the stables, managing to quiet the frightened mounts. The rest grouped near the yard wall, waiting. Iskander's dark locks shone in the torchlight. He too waited.

Several of the helpers from the caravanseri crowded the door behind Brak. The big barbarian stared at the occupants of the chariot as they alighted. The first was a tall, slender young woman in a rich sea-green robe.

Behind her, even taller, and of rather cadaverous appearance, marched a man with a silver head cloth and a dark cowed cloak. The cloak's hem was stitched with silver thread that formed the various symbols of the natural elements, earth, air, fire and water. Brak remembered a marketplace, far northward. He had seen such a cloak there. The man wearing it was a member of the cult of the Magians. They practiced their occult mysteries in countries to the south, in the warm lands near Khurdisan.

This particular Magian bore himself with a faint swagger. He seemed proud of his station and his sharp-nosed, sunburned good looks. Still, the relationship was clear—the Magian followed while the young woman led.

IN the torchglare the girl's hair shone like a new-mined wealth of copper. Her cheekbones were

high, aristocratic. Her lips were full and red. She carried herself with authority, even though she maintained a supple feminine grace as she swept along.

Her slightly upturned jade-colored eyes, never still a moment, passed from this detail to that, from face to face around the caravanserai yard. Her glance said that she'd halted the chariot for the express purpose of calling attention to her power, real or fancied.

She swept past Brak and inside the building, closely followed by the Magian.

"Landlord?" the girl cried. "Stir your shiftless carcass. Where are you?"

Immediately came the innkeeper's piping voice, "Here, here. It is my pleasure to welcome you, my lady."

"But our pleasure," said the Magian, "lasts only so long as our patience. Bring us two flagons of your best wine. Plus chicken breasts, and lamb roast."

"Lord Tamar," said the other man, "there is no spitted lamb prepared tonight. I—" He swallowed, wiped his hands on his stained breeches. "It shall be prepared shortly, as you command."

The girl laughed, a sweet, bell-like chiming. "Thank you, landlord. I appreciate your respect. That is why we go a-driving. To learn who is respectful and who is not."

From his position outside the door Brak watched the couple settle at a table. The innkeeper hastily called his staff together and sent them running into kitchen and winecellar. Iskander was staring at the windows of the inn. His lips were white. Hatred made his face ugly.

Brak strode across the yard. "Commander, my name is Brak. I'm newly come to this kingdom. Tell me about the man and woman. Why do they frighten everyone so?"

"Keep out of my way! I've no time for idle—"

Then Iskander noticed Brak's face. His stature. His thick-muscled sword arm.

"On second thought, I will. If we had a hundred or so your size, I might not be standing here cowering before her. And should you be of a mind to stay on, there's place for you in the army. A hundred places, five hundred! She's the one who has lured away half my troops, promising them wealth." As he went on, his strong voice seemed to carry an unbidden note of awe: "Nordica the Fire-Haired. They call her a witch. I am beginning to believe it."

A scowl creased Brak's forehead. "Witch? She looks far too young."

"That proves you're an outlander. She's a hundred years old, a thousand, in terms of the

secrets she must possess. She is the only daughter of Celsus Hyrcanus, the alchemist. Ah—your face changed. Do you know the name?"

"Today I heard it," Brak said carefully. "From—one I passed on the road."

"The man, Tamar Zed, belongs to the cult of the Magians. Eight full moons past, he was on a journey through this kingdom. It's said that Tamar and Nordica formed an alliance. A black one. They sealed it in lust and murdered old Celsus. People thought he was a relatively harmless person. What magic he knew was not malevolent. Nordica has since suggested otherwise. People whisper that the old man, after devoting his life to the search, at last discovered the final alchemical secret."

Now Brak's spine pricked again. "The secret of changing base metals into gold."

"Yes, transmutation. That's how Nordica has been able to lure scores of men away from the service of Lord Strann. She's set them guarding her eagle's perch up in the mountains. And she's promised them shares of the gold she and Tamar say they can transmute from common lead. Whether they can, no one knows. Certainly the deserters believe she can. That's half the battle. The power of Lord Strann is waning as a result. Fear of Nor-

dica is everywhere. But whether there's a secret or not, I don't doubt she and Tamar murdered her old father to find out. Ah, yes, Nordica's the kind to want to share her knowledge only with some base lover. She's been a curse on this land since the day she ran down a peasant's child with her chariot. She was hardly a maiden then."

BEFORE Brak could say anything, he caught a sudden whiff of an all too familiar stench blown to him by a shift in the clammy night breeze. The fluttering torches on the chariot threw harsh shadows on his broad features as he turned toward the gate.

"Commander, I smell something out of the grave."

"The animals in the stable scented it long before Nordica's chariot arrived. That is the terror stalking the kingdom, Brak. That is why people hide in their cottages by day as well as night. That is why my soldiers yonder hang back. That is why even I—the dark gods curse me for a coward—am reluctant to do what I ought. Run inside and spill her guts with my sword."

The odor churned around Brak, hot and overpowering. He saw a mental picture of his slaughtered pony. He began walking toward the gate.

Behind the chariot, chained to

it, he glimpsed some kind of creature stretched out on the ground. As he drew closer, his eyes refused to believe what he saw.

No dog on earth had ever grown to such great proportions.

"What is it?" Brak whispered, sword half drawn. "What kind of monster thing?"

Iskander had come up behind him. He whispered, "Scarletjaw."

Brak whirled around. He remembered the words of Ambrose the Pillarite, about a double curse upon the land. This was the beast which had slaughtered his pony. There could be no mistake about its evil reek.

Sprawled on the ground with its massive, blocky head resting on its forepaws, the dog looked to be half again as long as a man was high. Its flanks reflected the torchlight in a peculiar way, as gray iron would. The beast dozed but two of its lower fangs protruded over its closed upper lip. The fangs were white, wet, long and sharp as daggers.

"Then she must be a witch," Brak said under his breath, "to create such an abomination—"

"No," Iskander said. "'Twas old Celsus himself who bred the hound up from a pup. Somehow, by an occult process, the alchemist enlarged its body. He also grafted the hide that armors it. Celsus, though, kept the dog

penned in his castle as long as he lived. Only Nordica has loosed it on the chain. And sometimes even that chain is taken away. Some dozen people died when she let the thing run free once, to amuse herself. That is why my men cower."

Brak pulled his broadsword fully out. "It's a dog no more. It slew my pony."

Iskander's eyes flew wide in surprise. "Outlander, hold back! Its hide is like—"

The words faded as Brak loped past the chariot, sword upraised. The hound's eyes opened. Its great wet nostrils flared. With remarkable speed it scrambled to all fours.

BRAK clasped both hands on the sword hilt. He drew the blade back over his head, then hurled it downward with all the force of his immense body.

Scarletjaw's mouth opened, displaying a thick, liverish tongue and teeth like rows of ivory spikes. Brak's blade smashed against the animal's side, hard enough to cleave a full grown leopard in half. Brak cursed.

Pain flamed in his arm. The broadsword had struck and slid off Scarletjaw's flank as a rain-droplet strikes and slides off a stone.

Now Brak was doubled over, stumbling. He was let off balance

by the unsuccessful attack. On his left, the hound's gigantic jaws opened wide, wet with slaver.

With its right forepaw Scarletjaw swiped at Brak's thigh. The blow looked almost playful. Yet it toppled Brak into the dust.

Scarletjaw crouched, neck-chain clanking. The beast's eyes shone a baleful yellow, watching Brak.

Iskander's troops rushed toward the gate. The commander called loudly: "—tried to warn you, outlander! No iron can cut the hide Celsus engrafted—"

Scarletjaw lunged. Over and over Brak rolled, trying to haul himself out of the way. Scarletjaw was faster. Brak rolled onto his left side, determined to try the sword again.

He swung it down with all his might, at the side of Scarletjaw's head. When the blade jarred on the armored neck, the jolting contact made Brak cry aloud.

Scarletjaw's cavernous red mouth grew wider, wider still as it retreated a few steps, then bore down on Brak again, ready to bite his head from his body. Brak had not succeeded in rolling far enough for the animal to be pulled up short on the chain. And only total escape would save him.

Wrenching his mighty body, Brak turned over and over in the

dust, never releasing his broadsword. Then two sounds came to his ears: the protesting clank of chain pulled violently, and a woman's sharp command.

"Heel! Beast, heel and let him lie!"

A moment later Brak staggered to his feet. His yellow hair hung in his eyes. His body was marked with dirt and several small cuts. Through a mist of rage and sweat he glimpsed a lovely face, and a darker, bearded one behind.

Brak strode toward Nordica the Fire-Haired. She watched him closely, a mixture of rage and amusement in her jade eyes. At her feet Scarletjaw whined and stretched out, its foreclaws digging and digging into the sod. The dog's strange, incredibly hard flanks heaved.

Nordica asked, "Where do you come from, barbarian? Certainly not from this district. Else you'd know better than to provoke my animal. Or me."

Still shaking with fury, Brak spat on the ground. "I come from a road, lady."

"A road?"

"A road near here where this four-legged demon killed my pony."

Nordica's jade eyes widened ever so slightly. "So you're the one. We rode by, the poor beast was hungry, I saw no one who owned the pony—" She dismissed

the slaughter with a shrug which counted the pony's life a trifle.

"Then you can have no objection to my attacking your killer in turn," Brak said. He gestured with the broadsword. "These simpletons are terrified of the thing. Well, so am I. But I am a man. I will sell my life like a man, not whimpering in fright."

As Nordica nodded slowly, her smile grew. "Yes, for all your unkempt looks and savage gestures, it's plain you are a man. There are not many left hereabouts."

THE Magian had been standing behind her during the conversation. Now he thrust forward.

"Will you let a clod like this insult you, Nordica? Turn the dog loose for a meal. Let the barbarian try his blade another time if he's so confident."

Brak glowered at the dark-cheeked man. "Perhaps I'll try it on you, charlatan."

With a curse Tamar Zed snatched at the dagger hanging from his belt. Nordica's hand whipped out. She seized his wrist. Brak saw her nails dig deeply.

"No, Tamar. I repeat it—*no!*"

Her face had lost some of its prettiness. For the first time Brak glimpsed the evil which lay beneath the smooth, milky skin. Nordica released Tamar's hand and spoke again:

"Magian, remember who I am. And what I own. And who is

master and who the servant in our relationship."

Plainly humiliated, Tamar Zed let the dagger clack back into its sheath. He peered at Brak over Nordica's shoulder, plainly so taken with the copper-haired girl, he would allow himself to be shamed rather than risk her disfavor. But his eyes, watching Brak, were hateful.

Nordica began to walk in a circle around Brak:

"I don't like you, barbarian. I dislike anyone who stands against me. Yet there's a certain refreshing quality about your boldness. And one thing you certainly are—*strong.*"

Abruptly she darted forward, touched his cheek. Her hand was soft, smelling of an exotic balm. Yet her jade eyes were cruel, sexless, laughing:

"But don't stand in my path-way too often, barbarian. I need only one more. Powerful as you are, you might well embody the element of earth, the last element I require to close the circle of the four winds. Somehow I hardly expect you'll heed my warning. In a way I'm rather pleased. In another—" Dark as emeralds now, her eyes mocked. "—I pity your soul. Tamar?"

And with the Magian following, she jumped lithely into the chariot car, seized the reins and wheeled the bronze vehicle around.

Iskander's troops scattered to keep from being run down. As the chariot flashed out and away into the darkness, Scarletjaw loped on the chain behind. Brak watched until the torches the chariot carried were fireflies winking on the plain.

He was equally certain they would meet again, he and the lovely girl, the witch. To her the life of a pony was a small thing. To Brak it was not.

He would not slink away. He would punish her. He was Brak, a man. He would punish her even though she might be able to call every last demon of hell to her defense.

CHAPTER 3

Tolling Of The Doomsbell

THROUGH the night Brak slept badly. His dreams were bedeviled by phantom dogs with great red maws, by jade-green eyes, by the image of a bearded Magian's face alive with jealousy and enmity.

Morning was little better. A sickly grayness muffled the sky. Water dripped from the eaves and formed brackish puddles in the yard. As Brak wolfed down a butt of coarse bread and a plate of gruel he decided to set his mind to finding another mount. Just as he finished eating, the inn door opened.

Standing against the square of

mist-blown sky was a short, thickly-built young man with sunburned arms and a pleasant, roughly cut face. The man strode forward. Brak scowled, puzzled. Was this some toady of Nordica's? Outside in the mud a man-gy donkey waited, alongside a fine mahogany-colored pony with a tooled saddle decorated with silver bosses. The lopeared mule suited the peasant's coarse clothes and appearance, but not the horse.

"Since you appear to be the only stranger on the premises," the new arrival said, thumbs hooked in his rope belt, "I take it you're the one who attacked Nordica's hound."

"Yes," Brak said, rather surly because he was unsure of the man's identity. "The thing killed my pony."

"I come from the palace of Strann, Lord of the Silver Balances. To make amends, if that's possible."

A disgusted snort was Brak's reply. "Why? The beast got the better of me."

"At least you had the courage to stand up to Nordica. Not many do these days. I am pleased to meet a man who considers Nordica a curse and abomination. I feel the same."

For the first time all morning, Brak felt amused. He laughed loudly. "For a servant, you're outspoken enough."

Now it was the stocky man's turn to show amusement, but tolerantly. "I am a servant of one person only, Brak—I understand that's how you're called. I am the servant of my father Strann."

The gruel bowl tumbled out of Brak's hand and shattered on the floor. He gaped at the man's poor garments.

"You—you're the lord's son?"

"Aye. Pemma is my name. Prince Pemma, to quote the title fully. But I've never put much stock in titles."

Without ceremony Pemma hooked his sandal around the leg of a stool, pulled the stool from under the table and sat down. The scarlet color in Brak's cheeks faded.

"When word of what happened here last night reached my father, Brak—Iskander marched back to the palace before dawn to re-provision—Lord Strann instructed me to bring the finest pony left in our stables, and gear. My father also bids you ride up to the palace, so that he may thank you himself. Food, lodging—yours if you want it. Perhaps we might even persuade you to stay a while." Pemma's eyes had grown grim. "We need brave men, Brak."

The barbarian nodded. "That seems so. But the problem seems to be that men cannot fight magic."

"The effort counts for half the

war. Some are no longer even willing to try."

"Well, I'm not one. The woman needs to be taught a lesson. I'm not a man of great wits, Prince. Nor do I understand much of spells and sorcery, though I know such things exist. But on the high steppes where I was born, the slayer of a man's pony was caught and quartered. Where I come from, killing a man's horse was akin to chopping off a man's legs."

"Well said. Will you accept my father's hospitality? And the pony?"

"Yes, I will." Brak rose. "Show me the road to the palace."

TOGETHER the two men left the caravanseri. They set off along the highroad which sloped up to the foothills of the mountains. As they jogged along Pemma pointed to laborers tilling the fields with crude implements.

"These lands belong to my father, Brak. I am his overseer. 'Tis a lowly occupation for a king's son, I suppose. But when I was young—and this land was happier—Strann taught me to love the soil, the miracle of growing things. To this day I prefer to have my hands in black loam than around a sword-hilt."

Brak studied the workers bent over their tasks in the various fields. "Your crops look poor. Is that Nordica's influence too?"

"Partly. Our crops fail because our spirits do likewise."

"And Nordica is really as bad as she's painted? Can't you come to terms with her?"

Surprised, Pemma studied Brak a moment. "Would you come to terms after what her dog did to your pony?"

"Not I, Pemma. I'm a man born where the ice-winds blow in winter, and life is harsh. But you're a king's son, and the king must protect his own."

"If Nordica has her way," Pemma said, "she'll soon replace my father as the power in this country. When Nordica's father was alive, no one feared the occult secrets that had been in their family, it was said, generation upon generation. Celsus Hyrcanus was a man who burned with the desire to know, to understand. But he was not cruel, and had no designs on the throne. He spent most of his life hunting the ultimate alchemical formula only so he might have the satisfaction of having discovered it. Celsus even promised Lord Strann that he would turn over the secret, if he found it, so the entire kingdom might prosper. Not so with Nordica. She and the Magian, I'm sure killed him after they formed their evil alliance. Killed him—or worse."

Pemma's donkey had stopped beside a small stone pyramid at the roadside, a league marker be-

side which a road branched off to the fields.

"Perhaps," Pemma mused, "the spirit of Celsus Hyrcanus is still alive in hell, or heaven, or somewhere in between. No one knows how he died. He simply disappeared."

Brak's forehead furrowed. "And Nordica possesses his secret?"

"No one is positive. But I can see no other reason for the sudden vanishing—death—of her father. Still, if she has the formula, she's yet to put it into use. No fresh-minted bullion has appeared in the markets. The soldiers who have deserted to her are paid with hope and promises alone. Well—I must leave you here, Brak, and go tend the affairs of the land. Ride on up this road. You'll soon come to the palace. Perhaps, when we meet tonight at the trestle table, we can think of some way to strike at Nordica Fire-Hair. Each of us in his own way, I think, would like to see her fall."

Brak nodded. "To the bottom of the world would not be far enough."

PRINCE Pemma laughed, giggled his mule and jogged off along the side road, which led to a large section of grape arbors. Brak drew his wolf-pelt cloak tightly around his shoulders. He kneeed the pony forward.

The horse Pemma had provided pleased Brak. The little animal seemed sure of foot, with a friskiness that suggested speed and stamina. Riding along, Brak's mood improved, and as the road slanted upward, he strained forward, searching the horizon for the palace.

Presently Brak saw dim battlements spread against the slate-colored sky. Above a mighty gate, a tall, square tower rose. Inside the tower hung a huge bell. Two guards stood shivering inside the mist, within the portculis under which Brak clattered after crossing a moat bridge. But except for a single curl of smoke rising from one outbuilding, the manywinged palace of Lord Strann looked oddly deserted, like an abode of the dead.

Scabbard slung across his shoulder, Brak strode up broad stairs. Another guard directed him to the central chamber. After passing many deserted rooms that were nearly bare of furnishings, Brak reached a vaulted hall. At one end, high silver doors opened onto a larger chamber beyond.

Guards in threadbare tunings leaned on their spears at the main doors. Above the door arch a silver scale with its pans level was worked into the masonry as a mosaic. As Brak passed beneath the arch he noticed that flakes of the silver-

work had dropped off in many places. The whole palace, it seemed, had that same scabrous, dying look, as though time had left it behind.

Brak marched across the cracked marble flooring of the audience hall toward the man waiting on the dias. The man wore purple robes, once rich, now faded. His beard had turned silver like the balances above the portal. His handsome face was shrunken, pale. He lay on a couch, and as he attempted to lift himself at Brak's approach, he groaned in pain.

Drawing closer, Brak noticed how ill the man looked, stretched out on his side, one hand listlessly holding a parchment. At the lord's feet a dwarf dressed in ragged motley snored. Otherwise Strann was alone, unattended.

"My name is Brak, lord. I was sent here by your son the Prince."

Strann nodded. The bright, determined dark eyes did not match the rest of his wasted appearance.

"Welcome, Brak. I trust no one tried to bar your way."

"No one, lord."

"Not that we have a great many householders any more. Hardly even enough to keep the fires banked." He gestured to a huge hearth where a few embers glowed. But there was no hint of self-pity in Strann's speech,

merely the statement of inevitable fact. "Sit here at my feet, Brak, while I have wine fetched for us."

STRANN tweaked the dwarf's shoulder. When the little man awoke, Strann sent him scuttling off. Then he continued:

"The tale of how you attacked Scarletjaw reached me through Iskander early today. I felt your bravery should be rewarded."

"Bravery seems of little use against the witch-woman."

"That's true. Though Nordica the Fire-Haired is mortal, her secrets are beyond the ken of ordinary mortal minds. I lie here hour after hour, dreaming of ways to thwart her before she seduces all my people with her promises. It's useless. I have no way to counteract her magic. I am not even strong enough to take up a sword against her. The physicians tell me my infirmity is merely old age setting in. Perhaps so. My legs refuse to obey me. My sight fails at times. But my will is strong as ever. I have one wish—to destroy her, and the dog who guards her."

Now Strann reached for the jar of wine the dwarf had deposited on the dias. Strann's expression was sad, and Brak was angered to see the fine, warlike face destroyed by age and sickness and fear.

"Surely," Brak said, "there is

a way to kill the beast. Surely something will destroy it."

Strann raised on an elbow. "Brak, is that why you answered my invitation? Because you want to fight?"

Slowly Brak nodded. "Yes, lord. This quarrel is none of mine. Or it wasn't when I rode into your country. But what happened on the road yesterday, and last night at the caravanseri, made it my quarrel."

The ruler chuckled feebly. "Welcome news."

"I have no magical skills, lord. Only a right arm and a sword."

"And courage," Strann whispered. "My son Pemma has that in full measure. But he lacks the physical stature of a warrior. Perhaps you and Iskander could think of a plan—" Strann shook his head. "Forgive me. No doubt you're weary. Tonight at dinner we can turn our thoughts to Nordica. For the moment, tell me more about yourself. Where you're from and where you're bound."

The yellow-haired man launched into the lengthy tale of his adventures since leaving his homeland in the north. The dwarf fetched in a platter of joints of cold meat and Brak found himself eating hungrily, and swallowing wine between phrases in his story. Perhaps he felt so ravenous because gobbling food was human, normal, and everything

else in this haunted land seemed the opposite.

"—and then," Brak continued, "I was set upon and captured by slavers. They held me prisoner until I was sold in a marketplace to a woman. This woman wanted me to—"

THE barbarian never completed the story of his adventure in the palace of Hamur, Prince of a Thousand Claws, where ghosts inhabited the very walls. A heavy, mournful clanging interrupted him.

Strann went rigid on his couch. His right hand twitched, knocking off the wine jar. It broke noisily, spilling the wine like blood upon the marble.

"The doomsbell," Strann whispered. "Over the gate—"

Brak leaped to his feet. "What does it signal? An attack?"

"They ring it only when there is disaster in the fields."

"Your son!" Brak exclaimed. "Lord, I'll go."

"Yes, and swiftly. The soldiers are timid and slow."

Whirling, Brak rushed from the chamber. He raced down through the great mouldering rooms of the royal house, out into the yard where his pony waited patiently. A small troop of Strann's household guards had assembled, but the soldiers seemed to have trouble readying their horses and fastening their saddles. Brak

hauled himself up on his pony as the mighty bell swung slowly, slowly back and forth, its clapper striking the rim with a brazen thunder that hurt Brak's eardrums.

Flashing through the gate at a gallop, Brak saw one of the guards hauling on the bell-rope, and trembling.

Wind and mist stung Brak's cheeks as he thundered down the highroad. His wolf-pelt cloak stood out straight behind, like his yellow hair. He craned forward in the saddle, searching the mist for the source of the alarm.

Suddenly Brak spied a man lying in a ditch, his head cracked open. Blood dripped black down the man's cheek. Brak reined in swiftly.

"Why is the bell ringing?" he shouted. "What has happened in the field?"

"Pemma needs help," the man wailed. "Are you the only one who's come from the palace?" The man rose up on one elbow, white-faced. "Where are the rest?"

Brak tore the broadsword from its scabbard, leaned out of the saddle, face ugly. "Speak sense, fellow, or I'll lop your head clean off. What has happened?"

"Soldiers," the peasant gasped. "Strann's once—now they're Nordica's—" His spindly hand lifted, pointing into the mist-rolling fields. Faintly now, Brak

heard steel ringing on steel, voices shouting.

"Yonder," the man breathed. "Past the league marker, in the grape arbors. Nordica's soldiers are hunting Pemma—"

Brak jerked the pony's head around and sent him flying down the road.

AS Brak thundered up to the marker stone and swung to the right, into the fields, the sound of fighting grew louder. Women's screams drifted to his ears, and the heavy thud of hoofs. He galloped down the side road as eerie shapes loomed out of the mist ahead—horsemen armed with swords and spears, some carrying torches they used to torch the arbors.

Brak passed a woman's butchered, armless corpse. Then he saw the body of a young peasant boy similarly hacked to pieces. The center of the battle seemed to be a confused melee on a slight rise where several dozen peasants fought a losing struggle against twice as many armed horsemen.

The mist made recognition difficult for Brak as well as for the enemy, but it also gave Brak the advantage of surprise. He thundered in among half a dozen horsemen before they realized he was not one of them.

"Turn back!" he howled. "Turn back, you child-killing jackals—!"

From left to right he swung his broadsword in a gigantic arc. One soldier thrust up his sword to parry. Brak's blade travelled in one side of the man's neck and out the other.

A spear raked Brak's ribs. He kicked his pony, thankful for its instant response. Man and horse lunged out of the way in time to avoid a second, fatal spear-thrust.

Instantly Brak clamped his left hand on the spear, just below the head. He pulled. The soldier in the saddle opposite him was jerked forward onto the point of Brak's sword, and gutted.

"Pemma!" Brak hacked around himself, fending off new attacks. "*Pemma, where are you?*"

"Barbarian?" came a faint cry, beyond an arbor all in flames. "This way—"

"Don't bother with the yellow-haired one," came the scream of a soldier. "The Prince is the one we—" Seeing Brak riding at him, sword bared, the soldier hauled back on his pony's reins and tumbled off balance from the saddle.

Brak raced by, toward the burning arbor, hewing a path with the great sword whose edge was now thick and dripping with blood. Cruel faces floated in from left and right, but few risked direct assault on the huge-shouldered man riding like a fury through the drifting plumes of smoke and mist.

Then Brak sighted Prince

Pemma, fallen to his knees. Pemma was fighting off three riders who clubbed at him with their spear-Butts. Brak charged into the attackers, slashing left and right.

His blade sliced under the edge of one man's jerkin, cleaving the man's chest-cage nearly in half. Pemma suddenly saw a way out of the trap. He reached up to grasp Brak's free hand, hoping to be hauled into the saddle.

At that moment Brak sensed a man on his left and slightly behind. Brak's pony bucked and plunged, and the big barbarian sensed that his enemy on the left was driving a weapon, sword or spear, at his backbone.

Brak tossed his broadsword from right to left hand, to fend off the attack. The strategy failed. The soldier on Brak's left hurled the spear butt hard past Brak's upraised arm. The heavy metal caught the big man in the temple and lit weird colored fires behind his eyes.

"Take the Prince!" someone else was shouting. "The Prince is the one Lady Nordica wants. Take him!"

Desperately Brak tried to cut his mounted attacker out of the saddle. The barbarian's lopping sword-swing missed. Once more the man smashed the spear-butt into the side of Brak's skull. The barbarian dropped from the

saddle, cursing and knocking Pemma aside.

Brak struck the earth. All around, hooves stamped wildly, threatening to crush his skull. Pemma cried out. A horse kicked, the point of the hoof striking Brak's forehead. The big man let out a sharp curse and sprawled out unconscious.

* * *

Clang-aclang-aclang.

The tolling notes pounded into Brak's skull like the echo of a hammer on an anvil. Slowly, dizzily, he came awake.

His mouth was full of loam. His body ached. The mist had blown off the fields.

An ominous dark red sundown etched the land in sharp detail: the charred sticks of the arbors, the ruined furrows over which Nordica's men had ridden roughshod, the littered corpses of the laborers, slaughtered and mutilated.

Brak struggled to his feet, shook his head to clear it. Then, remembering, he started to run across the field.

"Pemma? Pemma—answer! Where are you?"

Among the corpses, Pemma could not be found. The Prince had been carried off. In the scarlet sundown, the doomsbell in the palace kept tolling, tolling, tolling.

AFTER searching the furrows for a time, Brak unearthed his broadsword half buried in a pile of smoking ash, all that remained of a gutted arbor. One last look at the desolate scene—Nordica's outriders had methodically slaughtered every last soul toiling in the field, some hundred in all—Brak turned his back on the carnage and trudged toward the palace. He assumed he was still alive only because the attackers must have mistaken him for dead.

In the palace yard Brak stopped, making a disgusted face. Hooftracks showed where the relief force had ridden out. Why, then, had they not arrived? He suspected it was because Iskander was not present to command them. Doubtless they feared any encounter with Nordica's troops.

Hurrying on through the echoing rooms, Brak found Strann in the audience hall where he had left him. The lord of the kingdom indicated a window embrasure where the dwarf perched.

"The fool saw smoke in the arbors. The arbors where Pemma went to work at dawn."

Brak nodded dismally. "Lord, the witch-woman's riders carried him off."

Strann struggled to control the sorrow wrenching his face.

Trying to offer some comfort, Brak added, "But he was alive, I think. The others were killed without mercy."

For a moment Brak was afraid the silver-bearded man would collapse in a shuddering fit. But however wasted was Strann's body, his eyes still mirrored an inner toughness. With his right hand he pushed himself higher, until he was sitting nearly upright. Sundown light seeping through the embrasures painted half his face blood-colored.

"Then perhaps," Strann said, "if Pemma is not dead, he was taken for a purpose. That is even worse."

Brak hunkered down before the dias, pondering. "What purpose could it be, lord? To force you to give up your rule to Nordica, in exchange for his life?"

"Yes, possibly. Or she might want him for one of her occult experiments. There's been much grisly talk of late that the secrets discovered by Celsus Hyrcanus involved rituals which require—" Strann closed his eyes a moment. "—the sacrifice of human life."

A moment later, Strann's shoulders seemed to stiffen. "I will not let her destroy me this way. Pemma would despise me if I did. There may be some means of learning whether my son is

alive or dead and, if he's alive, why the woman wants him."

While Brak puzzled at this last, Strann clapped his hands. The dwarf ran to the dias. Before the ruler could speak, however, hoof-beats rang in the outer yard.

Brak snorted. "Your troops re-returning, lord. Somehow, they never reached the vineyards."

RATHER than anger, Strann displayed pity. He shook his head as if to say he understood why armed fighting men would gallop out, search the countryside and somehow never come to grips with the enemy. When men faced the unknown—even trained fighting men paid to use their weapons—they could not be judged by normal standards of bravery and cowardice. At least that was how Brak read Strann's expression, though he did not share the ruler's tolerance.

To the dwarf Strann said, "Ride as fast as you can on donkey-back up to the hills where Ambrose the Pillarite sits. Tell him I bid him search out, if he can, my son's whereabouts, and Nordica's plans for him. Then return quickly."

The dwarf nodded his tiny head and hurried away. Brak asked: "How can an old man sleeping on top of a rock needle tell you anything?"

"Ambrose the Pillarite has perched up on that shaft since

before I was born, Brak. Indeed, no one knows how old he may be. But one thing is certain. He has a mind that is not like ours. He sees over many leagues without stirring from his perch."

"He sees when—*when he sleeps?*" Brak shivered.

"Do not ask me to explain how. I cannot. Ambrose the Pillarite is a mystic. A warlock, perhaps. But a kindly one. He will see Nordica, wherever she is, by whatever means he sends his mind travelling. He will bring us word of Pemma."

The yellow-haired man settled down in a curule chair with a pot of wine, to await the dwarf's return. The longer he stayed in this accursed land, the more bewildered he became. Of what possible help could an unwashed old anchorite be in this situation?

Doubtless Ambrose's mental powers were compounded of one part longevity and one part local superstition, nothing more. Yet as Brak waited in silence, he recalled again the peculiar burning strength in his arm, at the moment Elinor the shepherd girl had been about to drop into the Manworm pit.

Had Ambrose the Pillarite given him that strength?

Brak could not explain or answer the question.

An hour passed. Another. A servant in shabby livery slipped in to light torches in cressets and

turn over the hour glass on a pedestal behind the dais. Brak grew sleepy as the darkness increased. The hearth embers burned low.

HE wakened from a doze. The dwarf had returned, covered with dust. He was upon the dias now, whispering into his master's ear.

Strann's expression told the tidings. They were not good.

"What did the Pillarite say, lord?" Brak asked.

"That the hermit was sleeping so deeply he could not be wakened."

"Then it's time to put our trust in something besides visions!" Brak said angrily. "Lord, your son was generous to me this morning. Generous and kind. When I rode to the vineyards, I was not quick enough to save him. I feel his predicament is partly my doing. I feel I should try to bring him back, if it can be done."

"You would risk your life?"

"When a kindness is done to me, then I owe a kindness in return. No matter what it costs to pay it."

Strann laughed gently, but the sound was humorless. "Then I accept your offer of help. Take your chair and sleep awhile. Iskander is due back soon. When he arrives, we'll see what may be done. I'll stay awake. Sleep is

impossible if Pemma is behind the walls in Nordica's castle."

Twice more the hourglass was inverted before Brak again stirred out of his chilly doze, wolf-pelt wrapped around his shoulders. Heavy boots rang on the marble as Iskander strode into the hall and dropped to one knee.

"Lord, the patrol has returned, with nary a deserter found. They've gone over to her."

"And while you were gone," Strann said, "Pemma was taken by force."

Iskander's face whitened. The old man explained in detail, concluding, "Brak here wishes to try to rescue him."

"A fool's notion," Iskander said. "Not that I'm against it, mind. I'm sick to death of leading cowards whose bowels turn to water at the mere mention of that red-haired woman. But barbarian, Nordica's castle sits high on the mountain slopes. It's strongly built. Mightily walled. With the men who have been lured away, she can guard it against siege almost indefinitely. Further, the road up is treacherous. The fog's thick at night, and night is the only feasible time to attack."

Brak ran his thumb down the broadsword's edge. "What if we attacked not with a hundred men but with one? What if I went up there alone?"

For the first time, Iskander laughed. To Strann he said, "Lord, we have indeed found a brave man."

"Is there any other route up to the castle besides the roadway?" Brak asked.

Iskander shook his head. "None. The road is the only—" Then he paused, but again shook his head. "For a moment I was thinking of the sheer cliff on the western side. It meets the wall of the castle, forms the lower part of it! There are window openings, I think. Unbarred. But you couldn't scale it after dark, in the fog. It's far too treacherous."

"I could try to scale it," said Brak quietly. "I will, if we can learn Pemma's whereabouts."

IN hushed tones the three men fell to talking. By the time the light through the embrasures grew to a shell-pink hue, they had worked out a rough plan. Iskander knelt beside the dais, using his thumb to draw a map of the mountain stronghold as he remembered it, tracing the lines of road and cliff in heart-ash sprinkled on the marble.

Finally Brak nodded, gave a mighty yawn, said: "All that remains is to learn whether Pemma lives. And where he is."

Iskander scratched his chin. "Tradesmen call here. Peddlers and such. Perhaps—"

"Yes," Brak interrupted, smil-

ing. "The two of us will persuade one of them to join us in our plan." So saying, he hefted his broadsword and left the hall.

Shortly after sunrise the palace's main courtyard began to fill with baker's and farmer's wagons unloading supplies for the royal household. Brak squatted under the wall of the stable, watching and waiting.

At mid-morning a potter pulled in, driving a cart. He began to uncover his wares from beneath a blanket. The palace steward informed him that there were no funds in the household for useless purchases and returned inside.

As the potter began to cover his wares, Brak strode over.

"Good day, peddler." Brak smiled in a way that made the peddler glance up and start. "Perhaps you'd do better to take your goods up to the castle of the woman they call Nordica Fire-Hair. When you do, Lord Strann has a mission for you."

The peddler protested instantly: "I won't enter those accursed gates, master. I've heard tales of that woman, her evil ways. I—"

Gently Brak hefted his mighty sword and laid it across the top of the cart where it shone with a white radiance.

"Peddler, you will visit Nordica's house after you leave this one, or you will never leave this one at all."

The peddler's fat belly began to tremble as Brak outlined what was to be done. Brak's expression, and that blazing sword lying atop the wagon, soon convinced the tradesman. In moments the arrangements were made.

Brak called for servants to unhitch the peddler's quartet of mules. Three were kept at the palace, together with the cart and most of the pottery, so that the peddler would be sure to return. Brak and Iskander watched the potter set out through the portcullis, riding bareback on one mule, a few pots in a bag slung over his shoulder.

TWO anxious days passed before the peddler rode in again.

He reported to Strann, Brak and Iskander in the audience hall. He looked sallow, perspired much and appeared to have lost some weight. He told them:

"They bought nothing, as I feared. But they admitted me to the castle for an hour."

"For the sake of your own life," Brak muttered, "I trust you spent the hour profitably."

The peddler gulped, nodding. "Yes, yes. The Prince is alive."

Strann swayed on the couch, white with relief. "Where is he being kept?"

"As nearly as I could learn, from the servants I spoke with, in a cell."

Iskander snorted disgustedly. "Of course in a cell, you simpleton! But in what part of the castle?"

"The western part, the cliff side. The lowest row of window openings. I think they told me it was the second from the left as you gaze upward from the road below. I pretended that the Prince had done me an injury, and I wanted to call out obscene sayings as I rode away, so that he might hear. Haven't I done well, masters? I risked my life for you. Now it's only fair that you give me back my goods, and something else for taking such a chance."

"You may have your goods back with interest," Strann said. "A purse of dinshas for the fellow, Iskander. A fat purse."

Soon the peddler was sent on his way with an escort of three mounted riders, so that he would be seen safely over the border and not turn back and betray them to Nordica for extra profit. At nightfall, in a drizzling rain, Brak, Iskander and half a dozen grumbling, resentful soldiers set out from Strann's palace.

The rain pelted Brak's cheeks, cold and unpleasant, as they rode upward through pitch blackness. Presently the drizzling slackened off, replaced by a whirling mist that folded around them, ghostly-white.

After a seemingly intermina-

ble ride, Iskander gave a low, sharp command. The file of riders halted.

"There, Brak," Iskander whispered. "Look up."

High overhead, faint as fireflies behind the shifting murkiness, tiny orange spots gleamed.

"Torches on the battlements?" Brak asked.

"Yes."

BRAK climbed down from his pony. Although the night was cold, and made colder by the fog, he unfastened the wolf-pelt cloak, threw it aside. He strode to the base of the cliff, which seemed unbelievably high and sheer. He ran his palm over the rock.

"Wet. Hard for footholds."

"It'll be no better any other night," Iskander said. "The fog is almost constant here."

"Then give me the coil and I'll start."

One of the soldiers handed down a great loop of heavy rope. Brak wound it round and round about his right shoulder. Broadsword bumping his left thigh, he pulled himself up to the first low escarpment and looked back down.

Iskander and his mounted soldiers were wraiths in the dark. "Pemma will come down first if I reach him," Brak called softly.

"Be careful," Iskander called in return.

With only a low grumbling in his throat for a reply, Brak reached upward, felt for a handhold, pulled himself up to a ledge.

The face of the cliff was not as sheer as it appeared from below, being rough and affording many places for grasping on. But the blowing fog, driven on a wind that seemed to grow stronger the higher Brak climbed, had coated the outcrops with slimy dampness.

Brak had climbed perhaps five times his own height when his foot slipped from beneath him.

Desperately his fingers scrambled for a purchase as both his legs slid from under him. He kicked his right knee forward, felt it strike a narrow ledge. Pain blazed through his body. His left leg slid off into space.

With a strangled curse he held onto the rocks he was gripping and slowly, slowly raised his left leg up until he again stood on the ledge.

Above, the torches burned brighter. Below, only the fog whirled. Iskander and his riders had vanished, as the land itself had vanished. Brak leaned his cheek against the cliff, gulping air. For a moment he was overwhelmed with a feeling of being lost between the earth and the sky in a limbo of nothingness.

The broadsword scabbard hanging at his hip made climbing awkward. His fingers were al-

ready laced with many cuts and gashes from the sharp rock. The heavy rope coil weighted his right shoulder like a stone.

After resting a moment more on the ledge from which he'd nearly slipped to his death, Brak reached high and began to climb once more.

THE wind whistled louder, a sound like an alien soul crying out in pain. Overhead Brak began to make out the rough outline of the battlements of the castle. Suddenly the rope coil slipped from his shoulder.

Instinctively Brak whipped his left hand across to catch it. He swayed, arched backwards, a moment away from falling—

Wildly he flung his left hand back. He grasped a knob of rock, held on while his right hand twisted back to push the coil into position again.

Now his huge chest ached with exertion. The dampness of the fog mixed with his own sweat on his skin. He hung backwards, away from the cliff face, kept from tumbling into the abyss only by his left hand gripping the rock.

Tightening the muscles of that left arm, Brak pulled himself inward again, bit by bit. Finally he leaned against the cliff once more, panting. A night bird went flapping by. Brak swallowed hard, began climbing still once more—

As he neared the place where the cliff became the foundation of the castle wall, Brak's right foot came down hard on a bit of protruding rock which crumbled the moment he put weight on it. Bits of rock sheared away, went clattering down into the emptiness, making a great racket.

Brak crouched against the rocky face. He heard voices overhead, calling to one another. He risked a glance toward the battlement, saw helmeted heads silhouetted against flickering light.

Brak held his breath and waited. His whole body ached as he clung there on the edge of space.

Finally the guards disappeared. Brak clambered upward again, reaching high for the sill of the second black opening in the lower row of windows.

His legs hung free as he clung to the stone sill with both hands and dragged himself upward by the power in his arms alone. This was the critical moment—

THERE was silence in the cell. He did not dare startle Pemma or his guards. Yet there would be noise, and no avoiding it—

Brak tensed, then pulled up hard, flung his left leg over the sill. His broadsword clanked noisily as he went through the window and struck the floor, tumbling over and over.

Before he stopped rolling he heard someone cry out.



Lashing out with his right hand, Brak felt flesh, clamped his fingers over Pemma's mouth as the prince struggled to sit up on the rude stone sleeping bench.

"No sound!" Brak whispered. "None, or we'll never get out. This is Brak. I have a rope."

Slowly Pemma's thrashing subsided. Brak let him go. Through a small barred opening in the door, distant lamplight gleamed. Pemma's ruddy face shone faintly. Brak located a thrust-out stone in one wall, hastily began lashing the end of the rope around it.

When he had tied the rope securely he pushed Pemma toward the window. "Go out and down, while there's time."

Pemma never paused to question his deliverer. He crawled over the sill, grasped the rope and slipped out into the fog.

Brak waited, breathing hard. He kept one hand on the rope to test its tension. A footfall in the corridor startled him. He swung around, and the broadsword scabbard hit the stone sleeping bench, clanking.

The guard's head appeared in the door opening.

"Prisoner? What's all the racket? Answer me!"

Abruptly Brak felt tension leave the rope. Pemma had reached the ground quickly. Brak's choice loomed cruel and clear: if he fled now, arousing

the guard's suspicion, he might set the stage for the discovery of the rescue party on the road below. The guard was already fitting a key into the rusty lock.

"Prisoner? Speak up in there!"

"I cried out in a nightmare," Brak muttered, keeping his voice down to an indecipherable growl. "That's all it was."

Even as Brak spoke, the guard was replying:

"Perhaps I'd better see what you're up to—"

And the key squealed in ancient iron.

Cursing his ill luck, Brak tore the rope loose from its anchoring-place and hurled the loose end through the open window just as the door started to squeak open.

He flung himself full length on the stone bench, on his left side, curled up with his back to the door as it swung wide. He hoped the broadsword scabbard was concealed by his body.

"Let me sleep, let me sleep," he mumbled. Would he be formless enough, unrecognizable, in the faint light?

The guard remained in the doorway, sniffed.

"Well, everything seems in order. But no more yelling. I want to get some rest myself."

Ponderously the door squealed shut. Brak lay on his side a long time, eyes wide open, staring at the blackness of the wall.

Pemma had been freed. But at what price?

At dawnlight, with shouting and cursing, the guards discovered him and hauled him down through musty passages to Nordica the Fire-Haired.

CHAPTER 5

Witchlair

STRANGELY, Brak found himself laughing at his predicament.

The three guards manhandled him through a series of rock-walled corridors. They brought him to a high, dim chamber whose windows were covered with thin slivers of jade leaded together to form panes. Light from the sky turned a deep underwater emerald inside that room.

As Brak was shoved down three marble steps he noticed several globes of golden wire, a gilt star-glass and other items of occult paraphernalia strewn on low taborets and benches. In one corner, more than a hundred rolled-up parchments were piled. Brak's laughter died a moment, replaced by wonder. He had never imagined that that many separate books existed in the world.

The largest guard, a suet-faced fellow with a twisting white scar on his jawline said, "Hold him tightly while I waken the lady."

The man crossed the chamber

and passed behind a hanging. A small bell chimed. Once more Brak laughed.

"Stop that!" said one of the remaining guards. "You'll make her all the more angry."

In response Brak threw back his head and bellowed his mirth. Tears washed the corners of his eyes. The guards goggled.

"Let me go," Brak roared. "Let me go, you simpletons! I'm not going to run, or even fight. Else why would I have let you take my sword away?"

One of the guards whispered, "Starstruck. Crazy."

"No," Brak gasped, "no, only seeing things properly. I saw your faces when you walked into that cell and—gods, it's the first trick taken from your lady since I rode into this cursed land. For once—"

Laughter died in Brak's throat, drowned out by the wail of pain that came from behind the hanging. A woman's voice:

"—down a rope? Down a rope, you incredible imbeciles?"

And the large guard appeared, tottering, his right cheek ripped open by a long cut that oozed blood.

Nordica followed him into the chamber. She carried a dagger with a half-moon blade. She trembled. Her copper hair caught the greenish light through the windows. She advanced on the bleeding guard:

"Take yourself out of my sight before I rip your belly open for good measure."

The guard scuttled out of the way as Nordica swept around him. Her white silk rope belled around her bare feet. Brak's amusement was dwindling rapidly, because the glitter in the girl's eyes was the shine of hate.

"Bellow like a bull while you can, barbarian," Nordica said to Brak. "I warned you to ride on. You'll regret you didn't."

Brak met her gaze, forced a chuckle. "Lady, you've lost this part of the game."

"And you've lost your life for interfering. You soldiers—leave me alone with him. But two of you remain outside the door. One of you speak to my commander. Get the men working. By sundown I want every last opening in the western wall sealed with stone and mortar. Go!"

AS the guards wheeled and hurried out, Brak had an impulse to seize Nordica by her slender white throat and choke her. Perhaps he could kill her before the guards reached him. But he hesitated, not from fear, but from a desire to learn something of what she plotted, here in this green-lit room. Something that might help Strann and Prince Pemma win against her, provided Brak could live to tell them about it.

Crossing her arms, Nordica paced back and forth in front of Brak. "Up the cliff? no one has ever climbed that cliff before. No one."

"Two have now. I climbed up and Pemma climbed down."

"And you've gotten the bad end of the bargain. You'll die for it."

"That may be so," Brak said. "Still, you wanted the prince. You no longer have him. So I can laugh a little, at your expense."

A curious silence invaded the chamber. Nordica inclined her head, studied Brak's huge chest, his muscled legs below the lion-hide at his waist. Two spots of angry color faded from Nordica's cheeks. She managed a faint smile.

"Perhaps," she said, "I can think of a better fate for you than simple death. Perhaps Pemma's escape is good fortune, not bad."

"What do you mean?"

Slowly Nordica walked over to a low pile of silken cushions, sat down, clasped her arms around her knees. She gazed thoughtfully at Brak, and he marvelled again at her beauty which so artfully masked the greed, the fury, only her jade eyes revealed.

"I mean, outlander," she said in a voice almost gay, "it may be that your carcass will serve as well as that of the prince."

"For what purpose?"

"For the purpose, barbarian,

of making me the person who rules this little corner of the world. And, when that's accomplished, for the purpose of spreading my rule outward, to the end of the earth, even past the Pillars of Herakles. While I live, barbarian, I want them to know my name. To know that Nordica, the soft, white-skinned girl, is stronger than any of their kings or princes, anywhere. That Nordica had the courage to do what her foolish father was too sentimental to do."

Brak wondered whether Nordica was mad. The jade gloom of the chamber made reading her eyes difficult. Yet he suspected—and feared—that she was wholly sound of mind. This troubled him deeply. For if Nordica indeed owned the secret which savants and wizards had been hunting since time began, then she might make her quiet promises come true. Suddenly Brak no longer felt the least amused or triumphant.

"They say, Brak began carefully, "that you know how to transmute lead into gold."

NORDICA'S face froze. "That is my affair barbarian. I—" Again her expression altered, the icy reserve melting. "But what difference does it make? You cannot leave this place, can you? Very well." A restless eagerness

gripped her, sent her striding back and forth across the marble floor as decisively as a man:

"Transmutation is not a myth but a truth. It requires a ritual, however. Part of that ritual demands the presence of four human beings. Each represents one of the four major elements of creation—earth, the air, the fire, and water. Do you now begin to understand why Pemma was brought here while the rest of his workers were left behind?"

"Left behind dead and butchered," Brak echoed flatly. "Pemma was to be one of the four?"

"The earth," Nordica said. "He is no warrior, though he comes of a king's blood. He has a greater affinity for the land. At heart he's a peasant."

"And with four—captives—you can perform the ritual?"

"Yes. It is the secret my father spent a lifetime to unearth."

"How many others have fallen into your trap? How many sets of four have you slaughtered?"

"None, barbarian. You and the other three sacrifices who are even now chained in a cell are the first four. Pemma, by the way, should have been likewise chained the moment my men fetched him here. However, I wanted to talk with him first. You arrived before I had a chance to break away from my studies and summon him."

"Woman," Brak said, taking a

step toward her, "you used a word—sacrifices."

Nordica darted behind a low taboret. "Keep your distance, barbarian. Else I'll call those guards outside and you'll have a spear in your spine. Be civil to me and the end of your life may not be very painful at all."

A thick muscle in Brak's neck bunched. His mouth twisted. "Sacrifices. Blood-killings. I did not believe the tales they tell about what happened to your father. I do now."

"That I murdered him? Some things, for the sake of prudence, I will not tell you."

"There's no need. What kind of woman you are shines in your eyes. A witch."

But Nordica only smiled. "If so, barbarian, I am a successful one. And impatient to begin. Soon I will."

Gracefully Nordica walked to one of the jade windows.

"Out there, Brak, the winds blow seasonally strong. In a few days, they will rise. For the winds must be summoned before the ritual of transmutation can be worked. The four winds, Brak, from the four corners of the earth, combined with the four elements—that will accomplish it. I know how to summon the winds. And when I do—turning base metal to gold—there'll be no end to my power. It's a pleasing notion, isn't it?" Her eyes nar-

rowed. "And I'm sorry I shrieked like a fishwife when they brought you here. While you may not be a farmer like Pemma, still you're a man of the earth. Strong, with the earth's strength in your arms. Yes, I think you'll do excellently—in Pemma's place, when the four winds rise."

HERE at last, Brak saw, was the madness. A madness that was sanity, yet insanity too. Brak's voice dropped low:

"Before I'll let myself be dragged into your scheme, woman, I'll kill every man who comes near me, and myself in the bargain."

"What's happened to your laughter, Brak?"

"Gone. I'm sorry I let them drag me from the cell where they found me. Better I had died there than lend even small help in your black plans."

Briefly fury blazed bright in the witch-girl's eyes. Then, controlling it, she walked around to where Brak stood with his powerful legs planted wide apart, his hands doubled, sick anger making his broad shoulders quake.

"Brak, Brak—" Her voice was musical, full of lorelei-notes. "Why struggle so?"

"What do you expect, woman? Praise for what you intend?"

"At least you could make your stay with me tolerable, even if the ending is fore-ordained."

Again Nordica touched his arm this time constricting her sweetly-perfumed fingers so that her nails dug his flesh.

"Did I not tell you, Brak, that night at the caravanseri, that I admired a courageous man? Even though your courage is worthless now—" Briefly her deep green eyes hardened with the conqueror's invincibility. "—still, courage is a commodity to be desired. It's true you'll die. I need your strength when the winds rise. But you can take pleasure with me in the meantime."

Brak twisted away from her, so disgusted by her glib way of condemning him one instant and making crude advances the next that he was unable to speak. He glowered at her, while Nordica, for her part, seemed uncertain of her next move.

While she hesitated, Brak looked around for some object he might use as a weapon. He could no longer endure being treated like an animal in a chain, a human Scarletjaw who performed tricks as the witch-girl bade.

Desire won out over anger, and Nordica said:

"Is my suggestion really so revolting, Brak? Am I ugly?"

"Outwardly? No. But deep inside, you are—"

The word ready on Brak's tongue was a vulgar marketplace term. He never uttered it. For one

instant he had the eerie feeling that Nordica had somehow crept inside his mind, heard what he thought of her. The girl's cheeks darkened. Firesparks of anger lit her eyes again and she rushed at him.

"I am the mistress here! I will not tolerate this!"

Brak prepared to strike back if she came at him with a hidden blade. Instead, he was startled when she rushed by, running toward the ornamental lattice which decorated one area of the chamber wall. She gave the interlaced pattern of carved wood a close scrutiny. Then she hurried on, up the chamber steps. In a moment she was outside, crying:

"Guards! This way—with your swords ready."

A moment later, Brak was entirely alone.

SOMEWHERE in the rock-walled corridors outside, Nordica's soldiers yelled. So did another man, who sounded frightened. Brak raced for the stairs. If he could escape—

Half way to the steps, Brak hauled up short. The guards crowded back into the doorway, thrusting a man ahead. The man spluttered, struggled. A section of his robe tore, and a guard was left standing holding a scrap of ebony cloth decorated with silver threads.

The man was Tamar Zed.

Nordica appeared behind the soldiers, stalked around the red-cheeked Magian. Tamar indicated the soldiers.

"These unspeakable swine laid hands on me—"

"By my order," Nordica broke in. "When I showed you the spy hole in the lattice, Magian, it was to show you how we might watch my father here in his work-room." The Magian flushed even more deeply as Nordiac approached Brak and pointed to the lattice. "There, see it? The third interstice in the fifth row. The hole leads to an adjoining room. I thought I saw a glimpse of white a moment ago, like a cheek pressed tight against it. I was right."

Brak noticed the break in the lattice pattern when it was pointed out. The Magian remained standing with shoulders thrown back, arrogantly.

"He was watching us?" Brak asked.

Nordica nodded. "His jealousy wearies me greatly."

"I was a fool to believe everything you told me," Tamar exclaimed.

"About how you delight me Tamar?" Again Nordica laughed, the bell-like sound. "When you first came to this house, you did delight me." She walked over to the Magian, touched his chin. "But ever since, you delight me less and less." She dug in her

nails, and when he cried out, she laughed and darted away. "Exactly why were you in the small chamber, watching me?"

Tamar's dark brows pulled together as he scowled. "Nordica, will you shame me in front of him? Don't. I warn you, don't disgrace me this way."

"Who disgraced you in the first place, you jealous idiot?" Nordica shot back. "You disgraced yourself!"

So shaken was Tamar, he could barely gesture at Brak. "That you'd simper and posture in front of this—this clod, this peasant with his dull stare—is unbelievable."

"He's more of a man than you'll be in ten lifetimes."

The witch-girl had gone too far. Tamar's flesh darkened above the line of his beard. He took two swift steps forward. Nordica signalled.

The spears of the guards flashed up, ready to be thrown. Tamar sensed the motion from the corner of an eye, hesitated. But his twisted passion for the girl who had been his partner in the slaying of old Celsus Hyrcanus forced words from his lips:

"To treat me this way when you know how I feel about you—" Then, bitterly, he subsided into silence.

"What do you suggest I do with Brak?" Nordica said, tormenting him.

"Kill him," Tamar said. "Feed him to Scarletjaw."

"And what if I refuse?" Nordica's words grew stinging. "What will you do then? Take yourself out of my house? I doubt it, Magian. I'm familiar with the vein of greed buried under that hide of yours. So remember this. It was my father who made the discovery. It is my mind, mine alone, holding the secret, the final phrases needed to make the ritual work, the four winds rise, the life-stuff drain from the four captives. And remember the delights I can offer, Magian, if I am not so angry that I withhold them."

FOR a moment Tamar Zed glared at Nordica, plainly hating her and loving her at the same time. Finally, in a shuddering voice, he whispered, "You know me far too well, Nordica. You know I can't turn away from you, even though I crawl like an animal in front of you."

This time Nordica's laugh was genuine, delighted.

"A pretty speech! Now leave. And never again let me discover you spying on me, or the foolish people in this land will have another death to whisper about beside my father's."

Gathering his robe around him, Tamar Zed turned. Trying to maintain his dignity through his arrogant posture, he walked up

the stairway. Only once did he turn, to stare at Brak. What his black eyes promised the barbarian was ugly.

After Tamar had gone, Nordica dismissed her guards. When the doors swung shut, she indicated the cushions in the center of the floor.

"Sit with me a while, Brak. Drink a goblet of wine. See whether my suggestion of a moment ago is still unwelcome."

"No, lady. Let the Magian rut after you. I will not."

Nordica struck him sharply, stingingly, twice.

Brak's head snapped back from the surprising power of the blows. "Be careful," she breathed. "I can make you wish you'd never seen the light of this world. I have offered you pleasure, an interlude of love and—"

"Lady," said Brak calmly, "I would sooner plant a kiss on a corpse."

Nordica turned pale. "Then you shall, you incredible idiot. See how you prefer the dungeon where the other three sacrifices are chained! See how you prefer being fettered with them in the dark."

And with her robes trailing out behind, she hurried up the stairs and flung wide the doors.

"Soldiers? Take him. The peasant stink of him sickens me. Put him with the other three—below."

The guards swarmed around

Brak, pinning his arms. They pushed him up the staircase. As they turned out into the corridor, Brak had a last glimpse of Nordica Fire-Hair alone in the center of the dim, greenish room. Her eyes glowed large and strange and angry.

Despite the ring of steel around him, the curses and cuffs of his captors, Brak was pleased to be free of Nordica's chilling presence. The guards led him down through the lower levels of the castle. At one point they emerged on a short rampart running between two round turrets.

A clang of armor, shouting, a ferocious snarling drifted up. The guards halted. One ran to the parapet, peered over.

"The prince," he said, grinning. "With a party of men. Come to rescue this brute, I'll wager. But the lady has already loosed Scarletjaw on them."

Brak lunged for the edge of the rampart.

Hands clawed at his back. Spear butts pounded at his skull. He hung onto the parapet, staring down for one distorted moment upon a scene of horror on the roadway leading up to the castle.

The great hound with its dull iron-gray hide leaped and plunged among Pemma's dozen or so fighting men. Broadwords snapped against the hard hide. Men and horses alike dropped, chewed in half.

A spear crashed behind Brak's ear. The edges of the scene below grew dark. He screamed a warning to Pemma, but by then he was certain Pemma could not hear. The young prince, watching the last of his men perish, whirled his horse around and thundered down the road.

Scarletjaw loped after him. But the dog turned back after a short distance. Its tongue lolled, spilling blood-drops on the ground. Brak knew there was no hope for him now. And that there never had been.

With a wild scream, Brak spun around, determined to end it, to sell his life dearly. He charged the soldiers.

Half a dozen spear butts slammed against his skull. Brak toppled over on his face, sick with defeat, the moment before his brain turned black inside.

CHAPTER 6

Earth, Air, Fire, Water

WHEN Brak opened his eyes, he thought that time had somehow slipped.

He thought he had returned across the intervening days to the Manworm's liar. He saw an oval face, softly sculptured, close above him. The back of his skull ached. As he struggled up, he felt weights on his wrists. Chains clanked.

He heard whisperings. The

the girl's face floated near in the poor light, slowly lost its blurred outlines. The girl turned away, spoke to the dark:

"He's weakened. It's the stranger I told you about. The one who helped me."

"See whether he has any clever notions about helping us," said a reedy male voice.

"Where—" Brak stumbled to his feet, blinking. "Where is this place? Another cell—?"

"Aye?" said still a third voice, rougher than the others, a bass rumbling. "Far down inside the witch-woman's cellars. If I'd hid instead of standing my ground when the riders swooped down on my forge, I wouldn't be chained here with the rest of you swine, either."

The reedy voice exclaimed, "It's our predicament together, Runga, Let's not quarrel."

"I'll look after myself, one-leg," Runga replied. "You do the same."

Now Brak managed to make out details of the dungeon. It was a large, vaulted place with a straw-littered floor. Voices bounced eerily off the walls, a subterranean sound. The only illumination was lamplight, filtering through a barred aperture in a door. By this weak gleam Brak studied the gentle face of the shepherd girl kneeling by him.

"Elinor," he said. "How did you come here?"

"I might ask you the same, Brak. Two soldiers who serve Nordica set on me, on the slopes above the Manworm's den. It was the very day I met you. I've been here since, shackled up this way, not knowing what's to become of me, or these men either."

And Elinor lifted her right wrist to display a thick iron cuff.

The links from the cuff ran to a similar one on Brak's left forearm. Midway along this piece of chain, another chain ran to a ring imbedded in the slimy stone of the wall.

The two other occupants of the cell drew nearer. Runga was burly, thick-chested, stumpy-legged, powerful. The other man was old, spindly, had a wooden peg for his left leg. The men were chained together in the same fashion as Brak and Elinor.

"What's to become of us?" Brak repeated. "That I can tell you, grim though it is. Nordica—" Brak stopped, swung toward Elinor. "Wait. I remember. After you ran away from me at the Manworm cave, I thought I sensed someone watching, from behind the rocks. It must have been Nordica's soldiers. Girl—" Brak touched her hand gently. "As nearly as I can tell from what Nordica has said, you were brought here that day because you live on the high mountain slopes. Because you can symbolize the element air in the ritual

she plans to conduct. I was taken in Prince Pemma's place to represent earth. You there—" He indicated Runga, whose coarse face looked unfriendly. "Did I hear you mention forges? Are you a smithy?"

Runga nodded. "The best hereabouts, until that beautiful devil carried me off."

"Then she must have chosen you because you are closely associated with fire. While you, stranger—"

"Darios is my name," piped the one-legged man who wore a circlet of gold through his pierced right ear. "I don't know what you're talking about. Fully, anyway. But I see my part in it. I am—or was—the mate on a trading galley which sailed out of Corinthia. A fortnight ago, I left the sea-coast to return inland, because my brother died. After the burial rites, I was on my way back to port, and passing through this country, when a band of soldiers set on me at the inn where I stopped the night. Now I have a question. If we have stumbled into the lair of some mad-woman, and each of us represents one of the elements of creation—what is the reason for it all?"

IN simple syllables, Brak explained as best he could Nordica's past, the secret she had supposedly stolen from her murdered father Celsus Hyrcanus,

and the nature of the ritual, as best he knew it—four human sacrifices, each representing a basic substance of the world. Brak concluded:

"In addition, the witch-woman must wait until the seasonal winds rise. She maintains that she has the power to summon, at that time, the four great winds from the corners of the earth. That is when our time will come."

"Mercy!" the sailor Darios screeched. "Mercy, gods, that I should meet such a fate!"

With an ugly growl Runga reached over and cuffed the weaker man. "Be quiet with that snivelling! I don't like it any better than you. But caterwauling won't help."

"Nor will hurting someone not as strong as you," Brak snarled. "We're together in this, as the sailor said."

Runga's thick lips twisted. "Are we? Has someone appointed you our leader, to make official pronouncements?"

Anger bubbled up in Brak. He fought it, said nothing. Elinor had begun to cry, tears tracing silver paths down her cheeks. Brak put his hand across the shoulder of her woolen gown. But at his touch, she cried all the louder.

"There is a way of escape," Brak said, not believing it. "We'll find it. We have time yet, before she needs us as sacrifices."

Elinor shuddered against his chest, frail, terrified. "No, no. There is no way—"

"Frankly," the smith Runga put in, squatting down in a corner like some oversized simian, "I wouldn't mind surrendering my life to that red-haired girl if she'd let me stay with her for an hour. Gods, what a lovely face! There's not much I wouldn't do to have a woman like that, even for a short time. And in case the rest of you think I'm being disloyal, you're perfectly right."

Darios tugged at his pierced ear. To Brak he said, "The woman has tempted our friend sorely, Brak. He's talked of nothing else since first they penned him in here."

A gurgle of contempt came from Brak's throat. "You have little notion of the rot inside her mind, smithy. The evil under the pretty skin."

Runga spat on the straw floor. "I'll take the pretty skin and worry about the rest later. As I said, my affairs are mine, no one else's."

Accumulated weariness and frustration and the ache in his skull overwhelmed Brak then. He lunged to his feet, the wrist chain clanking.

"Smithy, speak out plainer. There are four of us tied together in this rock room, with the same fate in store for all. I will not stand by whining until the time

comes for Nordica to kill us. Nor, I think, will this girl or our sailor friend. But what about you? Do you stand with us or not?"

A nasty sneer contorted Runga's face. "I stand on my own, outlander. I'll do what I wish, when I wish. And if that red-haired doxy crooks a finger and bids me come to her, I'll go. And the hell with the rest of you. Does that make it plain? Even a half-naked savage like you should understand—"

RUNGA'S words fired Brak's anger to the point where he could no longer control it. With a low yell he jumped across the cell, jerked up short by the chain. But still he managed to fasten his hands on Runga's throat:

"Fool! You'd sell yourself to that black strumpet and let the rest of us die—"

The smithy flailed at Brak's hands, cursing. Brak realized then that anger had driven him to a cruel, purposeless act. He released his grip. But Runga had been goaded, and struck back.

His bent knee caught Brak in the midsection, hard. The barbarian gasped. Quickly Runga formed a loop from his chain and tried to whip it around Brak's throat.

Yellow hair flying, Brak backed off. He half-crouched, ready for the bitter fight he himself had provoked.

"Very well," Runga rumbled, "*very well*. Let's see who rules our little cell kingdom."

The seaman Darios tottered between them. "Stop it, both of you! This gains us nothing!"

Elinor dragged at Brak's arm. He pushed her away. "Let go! I'll give this lout what he—"

"Have you no thought for the rest of us?" Elinor cried. "A moment ago you said we couldn't escape from this place unless we worked together. Now you intend to make certain we can't escape together. We'll only defeat our own chances by spilling each other's blood—"

Runga chuckled. "I'd enjoy watching his blood run out. It's probably yellow-colored, like his spine."

Brak took another step, ready to leap and kill. But the pleas of the shepherd girl and Darios finally penetrated his rage-red-dened mind. With a disgusted snarl he dropped the length of chain he'd gathered up as a weapon. It struck the floor with a heavy clink. Brak wiped a forearm across his brow, said:

"Yes, you're right, both of you. We need every hand, every set of brains, weak as they may be."

The stillborn quarrel amused Runga even yet. "Yours too, barbarian?" He turned his back, swaggered off to a corner of the cell, chuckling, convinced he'd carried the day.

Brak stared after the smith. He was disgusted with himself for allowing the bully to override him. Yet he knew he was responsible for the other two prisoners, because they were weaker than he. And what they said about working together was right.

Turning, Brak walked back to the wall, sank down beneath the ring where his chain was fastened. Elinor followed. She seated herself a short distance away, neither spoke.

Darios curled up on the straw and tried to sleep. Every now and then, Brak glanced over at Runga. The smithy's big dark eyes gleamed in the reflected light from the outer corridor.

Better, perhaps, that Brak had killed Runga a while ago. The smithy's fascination with Nordica's beauty could be a serious threat.

Then Brak laughed to himself. A threat to what? For Brak to delude himself into thinking they had any chance at all of escaping from this dungeon was lunacy. The walls were solid and the chains strongly forged.

FOR an hour or more Brak and Elinor talked in whispers. He told her of what he'd learned of Nordica's plans. Elinor in turn narrated the story of how she'd been kidnapped by the red-haired woman's riders.

Presently the door-lock rattled.

Two soldiers, one carrying a lantern, appeared.

One soldier prodded Brak's powerful chest with a spear-point.

"Stand up, yellow-hair. We've instructions to bring you to the lady again."

"I thought we had settled everything between us."

"That is for Lady Nordica to decide." To his companion, the soldier added, "Unlock the ring from the wall block. We'll have to take both of them."

At the wall the second guard inserted a large brazen key in an aperture below the fastening ring. Brak frowned.

Why must Elinor accompany him? Surely the soldiers could unfasten the wrist cuffs as easily. But no time remained for Brak to puzzle over it. He put an arm across Elinor's trembling shoulders as they started out. One guard carried the end of the wall chain, the other his lantern.

Runga watched Brak leave, glaring. Again Brak marvelled at the smithy's blindness. That he should actually desire Nordica, knowing what he did about her, seemed impossible.

"Take the tunnel on the left," the guard instructed. "The one leading downward."

"Downward?" Brak echoed. He'd thought they were on the lowest level already.

Elinor glanced at Brak. She, too, sensed the strangeness of the

situation. As they descended along the sloping floor, tiny red eyes peered at them from niches in the tunnel walls, and there was a grisly chittering.

Why had Nordica summoned them to the very bottom of the castle? Her audience hall was on an upper level. Brak's suspicion mounted with every step.

After almost interminable windings, the tunnel straightened out. Here the torch cressets were far apart, and the air smelled warm and dank. Iridescent bluish mold sprouted in the cracks in the walls. Ahead, Brak saw an oblong of light.

A thick oak doorway stood half open. The guards thrust Brak ahead roughly, and he stumbled over a length of the chain, spilling into the chamber on all fours. Elinor cried out as the chain pulled sharply on her arm.

Brak raised his head. The first thing he saw was a gaping black hole in the wall, tall as a man, twice as wide. From it blew a stench both foul and familiar.

A massive round stone had been rolled aside from the openings by means of a log lever and rock fulcrum arrangement. Brak heard the scraping of silken slippers, whipped his head around—

To stare into the dark eyes of Tamar Zed.

THE Magian strode forward. "A little stratagem, barbarian,

Actually Nordica Fire-Hair is sleeping now. By the time you're gone, she'll be unable to do a thing about it."

Elinor ran to Brak's side. "I don't understand this. Why did the soldiers tell you it was Nordica waiting?"

"Because the Magian is her lover," Brak said. "Because his fine lady smiled at me. And even though I'd never touch her, there is such jealousy in him that he has to resort to this kind of trick to get rid of me." But Brak's jibes only made the dark-bearded Magian smile all the more. "Very well, Magian. Kill me and have done."

Tamar Zed shook his head. "Not quite yet." He strolled to the opening in the wall, rapped his knuckles against the round stone. "In truth, I don't intend to touch you at all. I'll have these two excellent soldiers—whom a pair of purses have sworn to silence about the night's work—put you into the passage yonder. They'll roll the stone in place. The passage, you see, is the same one down which Nordica and I sent old Celsus. The passage runs to the very bottom of the earth, some day. Down there in the dark, you can commune with the bones of the alchemist until you starve or go mad. A fitting end."

Brak shook his head, amazed. "You'd risk Nordica's wrath to be rid of me this way?"

"I'd risk things ten times worse to have the woman to myself." Gesturing, Tamar indicated Brak's wrist cuff. "Unlock him and put him in the tunnel."

The soldiers glided forward. One pulled a dagger, touched it to Elinor's throat. The warning was clear—should Brak struggle, the knife would slip into her neck instantly.

Aching with fury yet unwilling to risk having the shepherd girl killed, Brak stood like a great stricken beast while the key twisted and the cuff dropped off. From a dark corner of the chamber Tamar Zed returned with something long and glittering resting on his palm. Brak saw with surprise that it was his own broadsword.

"Take this, barbarian. Take it with you down to wherever that passage leads. Then you can spend the rest of your days proving your bravery to shadows, and duelling with the darkness." Tamar spun to the soldiers. "Throw him in!"

Swiftly the soldiers moved, one still holding Elinor's arm. Brak was pushed past the massive round stone into the black passage. Tamar flung the broadsword at his feet, a loud metal ringing.

"I'll take the dagger," the Magian said, slipping up behind Elinor. While he kept guard on her, the two soldiers sprang to the log lever. They leaned their weight on it. With a ponderous

Creaking and grinding of smaller rocks beneath, the stone began to roll into place.

Tamar leaned around Elinor from behind. He whispered something to her. The girl turned scarlet.

Laughing, the Magian called for the cuff keys. One of the soldiers threw the ring to him. Tamar caught it deftly, slipped the appropriate key into Elinor's cuff. A moment later her fetters fell away.

NOW Brak had the broadsword in his fist. He stood in the dark tunnel watching the line of the round stone's edge move inexorably across the opening. Half closed now, it rolled with a steadily louder grinding noise.

Brak's fingers ached on the sword haft. He longed to plunge back into that chamber, spit the soldiers and the Magian. Yet Tamar's knife trembled close to Elinor's throat. And his sibilant voice reached into the dark:

"—and when the stone is rolled into place, perhaps I can amuse myself with you, girl. Nordica hasn't been kindly to me of late. Nor overly generous. Would you object if I—?"

The rest of the words were muffled as Tamar again bent near Elinor's ear. His free hand slid up her bare arm.

The monster rock rolled on, three quarters closed.

Elinor pulled away from Tamar, gasping. He laughed, whispered to her again.

With a scream of fright and outrage the shepherd girl jerked away. Tamar cursed, flung up his arm. "Stop her!"

He shifted the dagger point for throwing, flung it hard. But Elinor was swift. The shining blade flashed over her head, clanged off the wall just as she plunged through the opening into the tunnel.

"Roll back the rock!" Tamar cried. "Nordica must have the girl for—"

"Lord, it's too late!" a soldier shouted. "The weight of it pushes it onward."

Elinor stumbled against Brak, clutching him for support. The crack of light between stone and wall narrowed, narrowed, and then went black.

Tamar's outraged yells faded. Brak blinked in the dark. He shook Elinor until her crying subsided.

"Girl, we've got to run wherever this tunnel leads. Get away before they move the stone aside again. At least I have the sword. We're better off faring for ourselves than caught in that stone box of a room. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, yes. I understand, Brak."

"Take hold of my hand. I'll lead the way."

Her fingers were chill, trembling as she grasped Brak's. Care-

fully he extended his bare foot over the slippery tunnel floor. He took a step, another.

He moved as rapidly as he could in this fashion, thrusting ahead with the broadsword, testing each new step in case they came to a sudden drop-off.

"The Magian," Elinor breathed, "said this tunnel ran down to the earth's core."

Brak sniffed the black air. "Or a place far worse."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. Don't speak. Just keep behind me."

ONWARD Brak hurried, balanced between the need for haste and the necessity to avoid any sudden pitfalls. Once, far behind, he thought he heard shouting, oaths, even footfalls, as though the stone had been removed and men were giving chase. He faced about, waiting.

Presently the noises died. Tam-ar Zed and his bribed helpers had decided against pursuit. All of a sudden Brak was not so certain that he would not have preferred returning to the room, and fighting.

The stench, the warm-blood aroma was growing more overpowering every second. Brak tapped, tapped, tapped his way along the passage wall. The floor continued to slope downward through complete blackness.

Then, abruptly, Brak's out-

stretched sword touched nothing. His right foot skidded.

"Back!" he shouted, but his cry was lost in the rattle of rocks dislodged and thrown into space.

Elinor pulled hard on his arm, spilling them both. Carefully, Brak clambered to hands and knees. He extended his hand.

The tunnel had ended, had become a narrow ledge along a rock face. They had nearly blundered off into nothingness.

Brak stood up slowly, gasping. "This—this is where they finished the alchemist. Not by murder, by imprisonment, slow death in a cave leading to nowhere. Or perhaps he fell down to—to—"

Words strangled in Brak's throat. He had grown aware, without realizing it, of a faint light all about them. Slowly he raised his head.

Far, far above, a dim radiance filtered down from what must be a round opening at the surface of the earth. He closed his hand convulsively over Elinor's as they huddled on the ledge.

"No wonder Celsus Hyrcanus never came back, girl. The Magian had no idea where the tunnel led. But I do now." And Brak's belly turned cold with fear.

Elinor whispered, "Brak listen! Down there—noises—"

"The rocks I kicked over have wakened him," Brak said. The broadsword hung in his hand, seeming as light as some mounte-

bank's toy. "I should have recognized the stench long before this. We're—"

Again Brak could not bring himself to say the damning words. He peered over the rim of the ledge.

Below, two great reddish eyes had come open.

Elinor saw them. She recognized them. The eyes shone, grew larger every instant.

Like a thing out of hell, the Manworm lifted its head on its

long, incredibly supple and scaly neck. Its huge white jaws lined with spear-like teeth glistened in the dim light from far above.

At that moment Brak the barbarian felt utter naked and helpless terror, and he watched, horribly fascinated and afraid, as that monster head rose toward them.

Rose rose, higher, closer—as the Manworm stirred, to deal with the puny creatures who had disturbed its slumber.

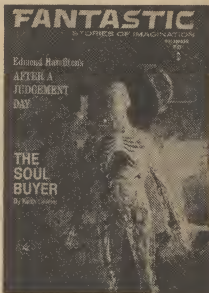
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and on the third day

By JOHN J. WOOSTER

*An incisive and, we think, truly reverent
speculation about an Easter long ago.*

FROM their invisible stasis bubble, Galactic Citizen 325-874-M-X³-2403 and his companion watched armored legions clank past. Jews scrabbled in the market place in ancient Rome. An objective eye would have recognized the Citizens as men but would not identify them with Earth man. Thin, slight, hairless, they looked much alike.

"Well, Three," the companion asked, "How goes our work?"

"About the same, Seven," the first Citizen answered. He used the familiar form of address; the last digit of the complex identity number. "To them I still seem to perform miracles, but nothing has really changed yet. You know what we're up against."

Seven shrugged narrow shoulders. "We knew what to expect. We happened to stop here and agreed that we must try."

"We've been over all that," Three said. "These people have a

few thousand of their years at the most. Another mission could not arrive in time. If anyone is to save them, we must."

"Do you think we can?"

"I hope so."

"Would it be better," Seven asked, "if they didn't distort you?"

"Probably," Three replied, "but they do. Each man sees what he needs. Most of them see me with a beard and wearing flowing robes."

"You still think they will kill you?"

"Inevitably. We are disproving a materialistic philosophy. A society based upon it will inflict the worst known punishment."

"And we could not substitute an android."

Three shook his head. "No tricks. I do not fear death. This is what we are trying to show these people. Why do you keep thinking up alternatives?"

"I will miss your company."

"And I yours. Our work comes first and sometimes I become so immersed in it that I forget you are a woman."

"Our work does come first," Seven said. "Then we will still use the generator to make visible the persistence of your psi pattern?"

"As soon as I die, turn the psi generator on full strength. We both know that the psi pattern persists after death, but we must make these people actually see it. We need only stimulate them visually. They will supply their own image. When they see me rise from the dead, their materialism will be defeated."

"But you know how uncertain

these psi phenomena are," Seven objected. "What if it doesn't work?"

"What of your faith," Three answered. "It will work. We must trust in God."

Accordingly, Three went out of the stasis bubble, wrought among the people, and in due course allowed himself to be crucified. On the third day thereafter, he reappeared beside his companion.

"I didn't think it would be like this," he said. "What did you do to the generator?"

Seven's sorrow turned to joy. "I couldn't make it run," she said incredulously.

THE END

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According to you...

Dear Editor:

The Blair cover for the July issue was far inferior to Vernon Kramer's colorful material. His artwork, though lacking in shading and detail, is very suggestive and casts just the right aura over FANTASTIC. Kramer and Lee Brown Coye are two artists whose talents, I think, are perfectly suited to FANTASTIC.

I imagine much will be said about "The Enchanted Prince 1963." It certainly confused me. I have only this question to ask: Why was no credit attached to it? I am rather interested to learn who is responsible for it.

"Bazaar Of The Bizarre" I enjoyed a bit more than "The Unholy Grail," but I note that "Bazaar" had far less to say. I usually enjoy Fritz Leiber, Jr. though, and have been trying to get a copy of his *Two Sought Adventure*. By the way, I now and then hear and see an actor by the name of Fritz Leiber. . . . he is

listed in my old movie book, I saw him the other day in an old picture called *Inner Sanctum*. He bears a striking resemblance to Mr. Fritz Leiber, Jr., and I was wondering, indeed, if they are father and son??? (They are. See profile Dec. AMAZING.—Ed.)

Keith Laumer and Brian Aldiss are my two favorite young authors. I have followed Laumer ever since "Worlds Of The Imperium," and still cannot understand why "A Trace Of Memory" was not at least nominated for a Hugo Award. "A Hoax In Time" may well be his best piece to date. I confess I have never seen a philosophy of a man so skillfully blended with an action tale in my life. The two rarely mix. But Mr. Laumer has done an admirable job of proving this feat is possible. Congratulations to him, he certainly has a lot to say about our society. And he has presented them in such an entertaining way. One can only hope to see

lots more of Keith Laumer in AMAZING or FANTASTIC.

I am not one of the people who, in your own words, "maligins" David Bunch. I do not praise him. I will merely say here that I have yet to find one of his stories entertaining or worthwhile. If he is trying to put something across to the reader, I suggest he attempt it in a different manner.

After reading the "Three Tales For The Horrid At Heart" it was a pleasure to see another contribution by this author, who seems to be turning up now and then in various places as quite an accomplished fantasy author. Who is responsible for the printing error in the Table of Contents?

Congratulations on Thomas M. Disch's contribution of "Master Said-And-Done." Perhaps I misinterpret this tale, but it seems to me that the author is quite dubious of the value of religion. At any rate, it's a thoughtful story, and I wouldn't mind seeing more along the same line.

David T. Keil

38 Slocum Crescent
Forest Hills, N.Y.

● The Enchanted Prince, 1963, was one of the three fables all written by Thomas Disch; the layout conceived by our own Cele Goldsmith confused a lot of folks—including us. Cele is also responsible for the error in The

Contents. Cele is, in fact, responsible for all errors around here. She is also responsible for putting out two nearly-perfect magazines every month, and we love her.

Dear Editor:

Well, you got me to bite again, if only for the sake of Mr. Leiber. He may, if he likes, accept this as a much-belated Valentine from yours truly to my only true loves in fantasy-land, The Mouser and Fafhrd . . . What can I say, except that again Mr. Leiber's consummate artistry has fleshed out the dry bones of a rather routine fantasy, endowing them with super-abundant and technicolored life? But this, my dear sir, brings up a point I must make if I am to maintain my amateur standing as a hater of all things shoddy in sf or fantasy; you see, I love the genre—I want it to produce only beautiful and healthy offspring, not abortions and deformities.

Yours is what I like to call a "representative magazine". That is, representative of the best—and the worst—fantasy has to offer. On one hand, we have a beautifully-written piece of high Grand Guignol in "Bazaar of the Bizarre," on the other, we have the "tales" of Mr. Steiger, which deserve some sort of prize for consistency in horridness. You publish reasonably good, if over-

ly van Voghtian, adventure stories such as "A Hoax in Time," and then present us with "The Devil in Hollywood." This is surely a descent into the Lower Depths. I see that this undead thing was resurrected from a 1936 ARGOSY. For God's sake, put a stake through the poor thing's heart and give it proper burial. This is the sort of tripe that comes up as a B (or rather, F-) movie on the Late, Late Show, which somehow we must explain to our critical friends as not an example of True Fantasy. Of course, they don't believe us, and why should they when they can find the same hairy formula in a supposedly reputable fantasy magazine? By the way, why should Prince Lucifer, that clever and highly successful politician, go around scaring off potential clients as Mr. Clarke described?

Paula Crunk
318 W. School
Compton, Calif.

● *All right, we're sharpening the stake. We're also readying two more magnificent Mouser tales (long ones) for early 1964 issues.*

Dear Editor:

In the letter column of the August FANTASTIC one Mr. Scott Kutina complained that fantasy fans have been slighted in the

matter of Hugo nominations.

Come now, Mr. Kutina, do you really believe that? If so, I suggest that you look at this year's nominees.

In the field of short fiction, for example, out of five candidates, one is a Grey Mouser story. You can't get much more fantastic than that. A second, "Myrrha," is also fantasy—horror-fantasy. "Where is the Bird of Fire," is, I believe, fantasy; as I have not yet read it I can not be sure. A fourth, "The Dragon Masters" is strictly, I suppose, science fiction; but its style has definitely more than a tinge of fantasy.

In the drama category, we have "The Twilight Zone"—which has won for several years now. It seems to me that more of its offerings fall into the category of fantasy than they do science fiction—and "Burn, Witch, Burn"—a movie version of one of the greatest fantasies of our time—from UNKNOWN yet!—*Conjure Wife*.

In the field of novels, we have, admittedly, only *Sylvia* of a fantastic nature. It should be remembered, though, that fantasy full-length novels are much less seldom seen than full-length science fiction novels these days, so this may be to be expected.

As for the Professional Magazine category—only three magazines, American or British—print any amount of fantasy.

They are FANTASTIC, "THE MAGAZINE OF F&SF" and the English "SCIENCE-FANTASY"—and *they all made the ballot!* Only two of the "pure" science-fiction magazines did the same.

All this for an occurrence which is, admittedly and by name, a *science fiction* convention? No, I can't honestly see that we fantasy fans have a great deal to complain of in the matter of Hugo nominations.

Fritz Leiber's story attracted me to the August FANTASTIC, and I can't say I was disappointed. While not the best of the Fafhrd/Grey Mouser stories (*that* distinction I save for "Scylla's Daughter," in the May, 1961,

FANTASTIC), "Bazaar of the Bizarre" was worth the \$.50 cover price all by itself.

For the Fantasy Classic department, I suggest a "Soloman Kane" story from WEIRD TALES, "The Wheels of If" from UNKNOWN, "Adept's Gambit" from *Night's Black Agents*, and/or all five parts of that classic round-robin, "The Challenge From Beyond," one part of which you have previously reprinted.

Dennis Lien
Lake Park,
Minnesota 5655Y

● *A good guess on your part, Adept's Gambit is on our upcoming schedule!*



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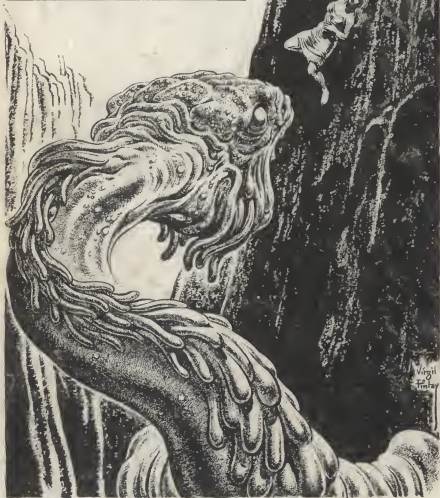
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*From the black heart of the earth
the monster's red eyes watched.
Brak went rigid in an effort to
keep from tumbling off into the
pit. The girl's wrist slipped from
his fingers. Death was upon him
and the girl too.*

see WITCH OF THE FOUR WINDS



Virgil
Finlay